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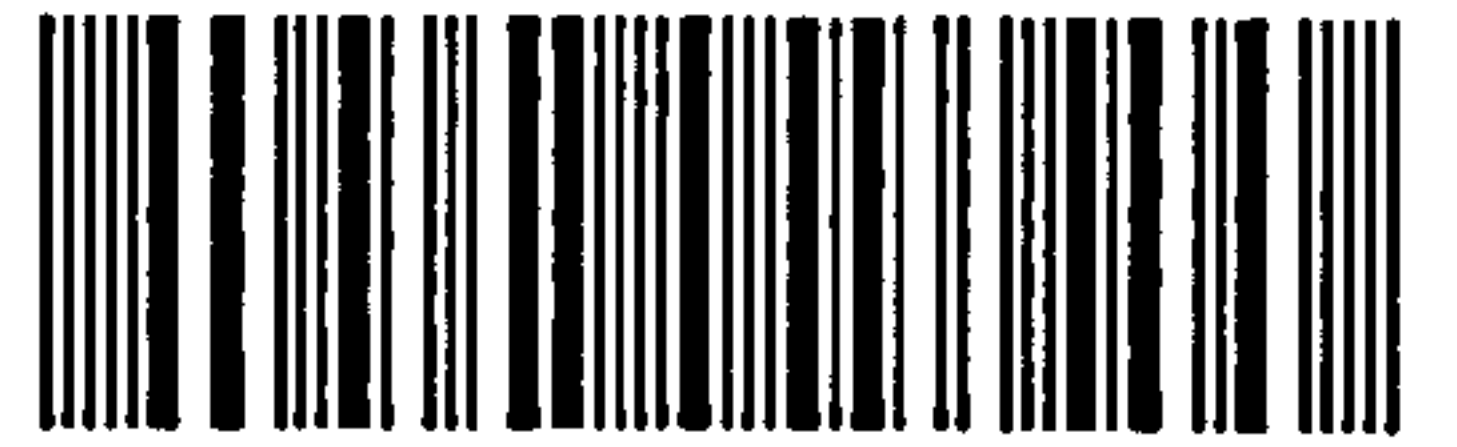
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**‘How do Open University students learn from
feedback?’ A case study research with particular
reference to Continental Europe**

Doctor of Education (EdD)

Susan Eileen Cane, M.Sc.

T5808827

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Abstract

This study explored the feedback experiences of students and associate lecturers (ALs), who study and work for the Open University (OU) whilst living in Continental Europe (CE). In particular the impact of culture and previous educational experiences on the way native and non-native English speakers interact with, and learn from, assignment feedback was explored.

A case study strategy was chosen, cases being bounded by residency in CE and enrolment on OU courses. The national, cultural and linguistic diversity of students plus their interactions and responses to feedback were surveyed. Semi-structured telephone interviews investigated student reaction to, and learning from feedback. Telephone interviews also gave voice to a group of experienced CE based ALs, who described modifications to tutoring and feedback practices, in the light of culturally diverse student groups.

Differences were found in the way native and non-native English speakers reacted to, and learnt from assignment feedback. For example native English speakers tended to view and make sense of feedback in a holistic way whereas non-native speakers were more preoccupied with matching feedback comments to individual aspects of assignments. These and other differences observed would appear to be due to many interrelated factors, such as non-native speakers' lack of previous experience with feedback and their personal, cultural and educational history. Additionally, the pedagogical approach used in each national system of higher education is likely to have impinged upon students' reactions to feedback.

The study also challenged the notion that all CE students study with the OU for subject based reasons, a significant group enrol to improve or ratify their English, with consequent ramifications for student use of feedback.

Although this study centred on OU students and tutors in CE, the findings are of relevance to academic, administrative and student support staff in any university that offers courses in a transnational setting.

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Abbreviations

AL	Associate Lecturer
CE	Continental/Central Europe
CT	Course Team
CWE	Continental/Central Western Europe
DL	Distance Learning
EAL	English as an additional language
ELQ	Equivalent or lower qualifications
eTMA	Electronic Tutor Marked Assignment
EU	European Union
HE	Higher Education
HEIs	Higher Education institutions
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
IET	Institute of Educational Technology
NES	Native English speaker/speaking
NNES	Non-native English speaker/speaking
ODL	Open and distance learning
OU	Open University
OUBS	Open University Business School
PMI1	Prime Minister's Initiative 1
PMI2	Prime Minister's Initiative 2
R09	Region 09
TI	Telephone interview
TMA	Tutor Marked Assignment

Chapter 1 – Introduction and Wider Contexts

Feedback is very important. Sbagliando si impara – you have to make mistakes to learn. Your comments were guidelines which, in my case helped enormously. (Ilaria, Italian OU undergraduate)

This comment from a questionnaire sent out as part of my assignment for an Open University (OU) Masters course in Educational Research Methods indicates how much students value feedback. Feedback, and students' response to feedback, has long been an area that has interested me, as I spend many hours attempting to craft feedback that will be both instructive and encouraging. General summaries, in-text comments, ticks and exemplars all form part of the 'feedback package' I grew up with in an UK educational system, and which I now give back as an OU tutor within that same system. I was, therefore, astonished when an Italian student asked me 'what does that symbol [✓] you put on my essay mean?' The realisation that some of my students did not know what this, to me, common place symbol of affirmation meant, triggered a growing awareness that I could not just transplant my Anglo-Saxon feedback practices to Italy. An awareness that had also been stimulated by ad hoc conversations with students and fellow associate lecturers (ALs).

In investigating the lack of 'ticks' in Italian education, I discovered what to me was a horrifying reversal: on test papers in Italian schools instead of the number of correct answers, the number of incorrect answers is noted. In marking classwork teachers 'ignore', in the sense that no sign or comment is made, correct work and only highlight mistakes. Having spent the first 11 years of my teaching career, teaching and managing 'learning support' in UK secondary schools, building students up

instead of knocking them down, I found this the antithesis to all that I believed in, and was used to.

In 1991 I moved to Italy and in 1996 serendipitously found myself in Milan when the OU needed a psychology tutor. I have worked as an AL for the OU ever since, tutoring two undergraduate psychology courses. Initially my student groups were composed entirely of students resident in Italy and I was able to hold regular face-to-face tutorials. Casual conversations during breaks alerted me to the fact that expatriate and Italian students initially viewed, and used, assignment feedback in different ways. Those with an Anglo-Saxon background tended to view feedback as their right. Italian students, conversely, were usually first suspicious, then enthusiastic, though they generally remained reluctant to question the feedback given.

In the last seven years the composition of my groups has changed and I now tutor groups of students resident in several Continental European (CE) countries (nine in 2008), and native speakers of many languages (sixteen in 2009). As the OU is a distance teaching university almost all of my teaching is done through feedback on 'Tutor Marked Assignments' (TMAs). I provide students with feedback by annotating their assignments and by writing detailed comments on a standard cover sheet (PT3 form), which is returned to the student with the marked assignment via the university's electronic submission (eTMA) system. Correspondence tuition, i.e. feedback on TMAs, plays a vital role in teaching and learning at the OU. The intention of the assessment process is that students learn from the feedback and then move forward in their learning. This however, is an Anglo-Saxon viewpoint. The aim of this research, was to explore the feedback experiences of OU students and ALs

based in CE, with the objective of illuminating differences in the way Anglo-Saxon and CE students respond and learn from feedback.

The purpose of this chapter is, accordingly, to give some background information, firstly on the OU in general, and more specifically the OU in Europe, and secondly, on international students in Higher Education (HE). The chapter will also present my research questions and define some important terms and boundaries that put limitations on this research.

The Open University context

In 2001 Shipley (2001) considered the OU to be the largest crossborder open and distance learning (ODL) provider in Europe, and in 2009 it had students registered in 27 member countries of the EU, plus Switzerland. The OU did not always have a European presence, although, as this extract from Geoffrey Crowther's inaugural speech indicates, it was always likely.

*We are open as to places. This University has no cloisters ...
From the start it will flow all over the United Kingdom. ...
Wherever the English language is spoken or understood, or used as
a medium of study, wherever there are men and women seeking to
develop their individual potentialities beyond the limits of the local
provision (and I have defined a large part of the world), there we
can offer our help. (Crowther as cited in Daniel 1998)*

Since Geoffrey Crowther spoke these rousing words in 1972 the OU has indeed flowed all over the UK and beyond. In 2005-6 there were 225,675 students studying with the

OU (HERO 2008), with approximately 24,000 of these in over 80 countries outside of the UK.

Over time, the OU has received many accolades, with Holmberg (2002) proposing that it was the world's first successful distance teaching university and Hall (1991:140) stating that it '*has become the most admired model for the development of distance learning institutions across the world.*' This was confirmed by Daniel (1998) who considers that the OU has a pre-eminent position as the unchallenged world leader in university-level ODL.

The idea of an 'open university' was first suggested in 1962 by Michael Young, stimulus also came from the BBC and Ministry of Education which developed a comprehensive plan for an open university. This plan was put into action and the first students began studying in 1971. By 1980, 70,000 students were enrolled, with about 6,000 graduating annually. Since then the OU has continued to expand, constantly increasing both its academic and professional courses in many subject areas.

Almost immediately after its inception the OU became active on the world scene (Daniel 1998) and its international operations have been described in depth by a number of authors (Perry 1976; Tait 1994; Mason 1998). Initially, a condition of admission was that the applicant should have a UK address (Tait 1994), but the OU soon had to develop policies concerning its international reach, prompted by the fact that amongst its large student body, (most of whom were employed full-time), it had students who were moving out of the UK for various reasons (Daniel 1998). Many of these students wanted to continue their studies and the University decided to offer a limited service to make this possible, provided students made their own overseas

mailing arrangements. This policy was later reviewed, and in 1972/3 the university began a tentative expansion into Europe. Initially enrolment was limited to Armed Forces personnel in Germany and Cyprus. In the early 1980s a further extension occurred, stimulated by the significant community of OU students in Brussels, (mostly British civil servants employed by the European Commission and their families). The next impetus came during the 1980s from another location of important EU functions, Luxembourg. From Luxembourg, the OU expanded into the Netherlands, where a change in enrolment policy occurred and students began to be recruited from outside the British and international expatriate community (Tait 1994). By the early 1990s approximately 500 students were enrolled from within the then 'Benelux' countries (Belgium, The Netherlands and Luxembourg).

As is the case today, these CE students had to pay considerable supplementary fees. In 2009, the fee for a 60-point undergraduate course for a UK based student is £630, the equivalent fee for a CE student is 140% higher at £1510.

Tait (1994) writes at length about changes within the OU in the 1990-1993 period, when it expanded its provision throughout the whole of the EU and other European countries. He considers two significant factors prompted the change from a domestic to international university. The first was the increasing emphasis on quality assurance and customer centred approaches and the fact that '*European customers began to make their influence felt*' (Tait 1994:84). The second was the realisation that '*students in Benelux represented a significant potential market*' (Tait 1994:85). In 1992 the University decided to accept enrolments from all European Community residents, plus Switzerland, and since 1998 it has offered some electronically tutored

courses globally. In 2008 there were more than 6,400 students registered in CE (Pollard, Country Coordinator – personal communication).

The OU's presence in Italy began in 1992 with the appointment of a country coordinator and the enrolment of half-a-dozen students. Student numbers rose steadily until 1999 and have remained stable ever since. A survey by Regan in 1998 revealed that there were 447 students registered in Italy, of those who replied to his survey 53% were British, 30% Italian and 17% 'other' nationalities, these proportions too, have remained similar (Pollard, country coordinator – Personal communication). There are five ALs based in Italy, all of whom are British.

For administrative purposes the OU is organised into 'Regions', Region 09 (R09), the Open University in the North, based in Newcastle, has specific responsibility for administering courses for students living in CE. These students make up half of the total students registered with R09, the other half being students registered in the Northern counties of England. CE students are supported in a similar manner to those in the UK, with each student being allocated a course specific tutor. Some tutors are UK based and some are based in CE. R09 also supports a network of country coordinators and advisors, who as well as promoting the OU in the country concerned, also offer advice and assistance to students.

The 170 CE based ALs are in a similar position to students with respect to face-to-face contact with the Regional Centre and most contact is via e-mail, OU intranet and telephone. ALs can obtain subject specific support from course-teams and course conferences. R09 ALs based in the UK have the opportunity to attend a variety of

staff development events, unfortunately costs prohibit these events being open to CE ALs and so the region holds a CE staff-development weekend every four years.

Despite having operated in Europe since 1972 the OU lacks a real institutional policy in this area. According to OU statistics, this may be due to the lack of financial incentives, as it is reported that in Western Europe in 2002/3 the University taught almost 15,000 students for a net profit of £1000, and in Continental and Eastern Europe just over 15,000 students provided a net deficit of £95,000 (OU 2004).

The UK government's decision to eliminate Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) grants for students with equivalent or lower qualifications has seriously affected the University and it is now planning to reduce its dependency on HEFCE income. The OU is hoping to increase income from international activities via new partnerships and delivery models, such as open educational resources and global online programmes (OU 2008c). In 2008 the OU published '*OU futures: the Open University's strategic priorities 2008-9*', while not targeting CE specifically, this document gives some indication of OU policy with regard to 'internationalization'. The OU states as one of its ten core values, that as an international organization, it is committed to reflecting both UK and global perspectives in its study opportunities (OU 2008c). Although Europe is mentioned, the focus is more on the development of potential OU partnerships and the emerging markets of Africa, China and India, rather than the conventional ODL teaching that is at present offered in Europe.

Feedback within the OU

The main tutor-student contact within the OU is via assignment feedback. The grades and comments that students receive on their assignments, (6-8 per 60-point course), tend to be the students main or only form of feedback on their work (Atkins et al. 2002). The majority of OU courses are designated either 30 or 60-points, (equivalent respectively to one-quarter and one-half of a year's full-time study). Most students in full-time employment study 60-points worth of course(s) at anyone time. Being ODL students, OU students may miss out on other forms of teacher-student contact but with respect to feedback Gibbs and Simpson (2004:9) suggest *'today's Open University students may receive fifty times as much feedback on assignments over the course of an entire degree programme as do students at conventional universities.'*

Much advice has been written for academics concerning how to structure feedback (see Brown and Glover 2006; Gibbs and Simpson 2004; Hounsell 1995), but here I will confine myself to that written specifically for OU ALs. The OU provides ALs with a wide range of paper based and electronic materials to support staff development, with the 'Supporting Open Learners (SOL) Reader' (Atkins et al. 2002) as the key text. The University promotes a constructivist approach to student learning, affirming that this has become 'espoused theory' in HE in all subject areas. The SOL reader stresses that this approach underlies the pedagogic strategy of course teams and ALs in their focus on student development of *'a critical grasp of knowledge and the intellectual skills of problem-solving and analysis'* (Atkins et al. 2002:125). Student development, then is a key aspect of correspondence tuition (feedback) at the OU. Staff development materials advise tutors to focus on two particular questions as they provide feedback on assignments: *'How can I best help this particular student?'* and *'What sort of comments will enable the student to*

progress, to improve and to develop?' (Grugeon 1973:33). In answering these questions effectively the tutor needs to evaluate a student's performance and identify the gap between the student's performance and the ideal performance (DeNisi and Kluger 2000). By highlighting this 'performance gap' the tutor hopes to motivate change or learning and to scaffold the student in their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978), therefore enabling the student to develop beyond their current level of performance (Orsmond et al. 2002).

The role of the tutor

Both the giver and the receiver are important in the feedback process. Lentell (1994:51) though, describes a dominant model in distance learning (DL) which *'ascribes a minimalistic role to the tutor in student learning'*. She suggests that this model de-skills tutors, seeing them only as *'technicians applying the competencies they have been trained to perform.'* This is at odds however, with the proposal that in DL it is only the tutor who has an individualised view of the student (Lentell 2003). As an AL, I identify with Lentell's (2003) suggestion that tutors may be 'unheard' or 'undervalued' and in this study I hope to give voice to, and demonstrate the value of these 'unheard' and 'undervalued' individuals.

Within the OU most tutors work full-time elsewhere or hold a number of part-time positions, Lentell (1994:51) suggests that that in these situations tutors' *'situational knowledge'*, is not only not valued but is not recognised as knowledge. Certainly within the OU ALs appear to feel that they are institutionally powerless, and rarely have resources to undertake and publish research. This maybe because *'tutor knowledge is never complete and not open to 'neat' formulations that can readily produce academic papers'* (Lentell 1994:51) but also because ALs may not value

their professional knowledge because in HE it tends to be only academic knowledge is given status. Lentell (1994) concludes that very little is known about written tutor-student learning dialogues in DL despite the fact that correspondence tuition is the form of individual tuition all students receive. DL organizations such as the OU would find it very difficult to maintain their high standards without the army of experienced tutors who provide feedback and guidance to students but despite acknowledging the vital role that tutors play, White et al. (2005) bemoan the scarcity of attention that has been given to tutoring at a distance. Indeed compared to the attention given to course hardware and software the work of ALs is scarcely paid attention to (Lentell and O'Rourke 2004). A point reinforced by Tait and Mills (2003) who identify that despite the apparent perception of the importance of the tutor's role, compared to the substantial body of literature concerning the production of learning materials and resources, relatively little research has been undertaken which relates to supporting students at a distance. This study then, will attempt to redress some of these issues and give voice to the expertise that CE ALs have built up. It will also try to counteract the low status view that many academics have of tutors, encapsulated in this statement by Rumble (1995:17):

There seems little doubt that the work undertaken by peripheral workers within distance education - and particularly those who tutor and council students, or mark their assignments or examination scripts – involves less skill than a traditional academic job

This research however is not just about giving feedback to OU students, it is concerned with a special group of OU students – those resident in CE.

International students in higher education

Approximately 30% of my 2008 student cohort were British, the other 70% comprising nineteen other nationalities. The majority of students I tutor consequently are 'international'. International students are not a recent phenomenon; indeed, throughout the centuries there is a long history of international students in Europe, as evidenced by the '*wandering scholar travelling Europe and studying at different universities*' (Harris 1995:79). It is not just within the OU that international students can be found, this is a world wide phenomenon. Global demand for HE is forecast to increase from the 48 million it was in 1990 to an estimated 159 million in 2025 (Blight 1995). As the demand for HE has grown so has the number of students studying at universities outside of their home countries, with UNESCO (1997) statistics showing that there were 1,502,040 foreign students in the top 50 host countries in 1994/5. Recent research by the British Council forecasts a global flow of approximately 5.8 million students by 2020 (Böhm et al. 2004). English is the working language of the international economy, so it is not surprising that the main providers in this market are the United States, Britain and Australia. In Britain in 2008 there were 389,330 international students enrolled in HE, 16% of the total HE students (Atlas of Student Mobility 2008). In the academic year 2007/8, for the first time, HESA collected data on the number of students studying outside the UK for qualifications awarded by UK HE institutions (HEIs), and this revealed almost 200,000 'off-shore' students. Approximately half these students were enrolled on DL courses while the other half were either studying at overseas campuses directly run by UK HEIs or studying for qualifications offered by UK institutions in collaboration with foreign partners (HESA 2009).

These international students are of great financial significance to UK universities, as since 1980, non-EU students, (who comprise the major part of overseas students), have had to pay for the full cost of their courses which on average is 60% more than those paying domestic rates, something which goes some way to help fund the cost of teaching home students (Asteris 2006). The significance of the international education 'industry' has not gone unnoticed and is estimated to be worth more than 10 billion pounds (British Council 2006). Given the economic importance of international students to UK HEIs, it is not surprising that they have become a high profile policy issue as evidenced by The Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education I (PMI1) and II (2006-11), both of which concentrate mainly on marketing and student recruitment. The first PMI, launched in 1999, aimed at increasing the number of international students in UK HE and further education and was hugely successful. Building on this success, PMI2 was launched in 2006 and is a five-year strategy aimed at securing the UK's position as a leader in international education and sustaining the growth of UK international education delivered in the UK and overseas (British Council 2006).

Several researchers have investigated why international students come to the UK to study (Allen and Higgins 1994; Chan and Drover 1997; Lewis 1984) and it was concluded that the main reasons were mostly instrumental, being:

- English as the language of instruction
- The recognition of a UK qualification by home governments and major employers
- High standard of education provided by universities with good international reputations
- Prior familiarity with an Anglo-Saxon system of education
- Enhancement of qualifications and employment prospects

According to Manning and Mayor (1999) evidence suggests that students from outside the UK choose to register with the OU for several of the reasons outlined above, but they also identified a further key motivator that was particularly pertinent to the OU situation: flexibility. Flexible learning is often cited as a significant factor in the attraction of DL students as a whole, and it appears that this is a key factor for many OU CE students. Almost all CE students work and wish to study at the same time, they often also belong to a very mobile population, with a large number working for, (or having a partner who works for), multi-national organisations, these students may also change jobs frequently or have jobs that require them to travel often (Manning and Mayor 1999).

That fact that instruction in the OU is in English is a very attractive feature for overseas students. Mayor (1996) conducted a survey of all new OU foundation level entrants based CE who were non-native English speakers (NNES) and discovered that 47% had specifically set out to improve their English through OU study. This may lead to a mismatch in expectations between student and tutor as the OU is a university and not a language school. The OU's 1969 mission statement refers to its openness '*as to people, places, methods and ideas*'. This means that for all undergraduate courses there are no formal entry requirements, not even with respect to English language, something clearly stated on the OU website: '*The OU does not require you to have a qualification in English language or to take a specific test before you can register for a course*' (OU 2008a). Although this is qualified by: '*However, you do need to have a reasonable standard of English to study successfully with us*'. Guidance is not given about what is considered a 'reasonable standard', although a further document does state:

All courses are taught in English and you must be able to read, write and speak English with a high degree of competence. If English is not your first language please contact The Open University in the North for advice. (OU 2007a)

Prior to 2005 the issue of NNEs in the OU was largely seen as something dealt with by R09. During the early years of this century more and more regions began to receive enrolments from NNEs domiciled in the UK and in 2005 the OU acknowledged that within the UK student population, English as an Additional Language (EAL) was a problem and the 'OU-EAL Interest Group' was set up, which ran until 2007. The group was seen as both a reference point and a gateway to resources for the university's 'inclusive approach' to students with EAL. It is not clear what proportion of OU students do not have English as their first language, but minutes from a report on the 'English as an Additional Language (EAL) Cross-fertilisation meeting' (Mutlow 2005) indicate that in Region 02 on several courses 25% of the cohort were NNEs and that this may be even higher in regions with urban populations. This report also acknowledges that:

Students with EAL experience significant barriers to progression in HE due to their (temporary) English language shortfalls and prior educational experience which may not have geared them towards learning in a UK context. These are relatively new types of students to the OU and have significantly different needs which we are challenged to address because of our homogeneity. (Mutlow 2005).

While acknowledging the overlap between the OU's international ambitions and the need to meet the needs of students with EAL the report recognised that these issues

were not necessarily linked. The report highlights the contradictions between the OU's open access and widening participation policies and the reality that often students with EAL are unsuccessful, pointing out that:

Open access might on the one hand make us appear non-exclusive but on the other hand may confirm our exclusivity as EAL students then fail due to 'unreadiness' in language, poor course choice or misunderstanding about unfamiliar study requirements and academic expectations. (Mutlow 2005)

Language difficulties are not the only problems that international students face when adapting to the British educational system. British universities have experienced sharp increases in international student numbers. In the past, these students were expected to 'fit-in' to the British system, with the PMIs this perception has changed, and these students are now seen as valued consumers of a service for which there is increasing choice from competing institutions. This change in focus, alongside changes to UK HE brought about by the Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing 1997) has stimulated considerable research. Unfortunately very little has focused on undergraduate international students and the special problems they present (McNamarra and Harris 1997). Some problems identified as being experienced by international students, i.e. living in a foreign country, homesickness, racial discrimination, etc., do not apply to DL students, but others such as 'culture shock' may occur, as students experience many things that are different from what they are used to (Brennan 1997). It is important that tutors do not view 'international students' as the same as their British course-mates and tutor them as if the group were homogenous, it needs to be remembered that these students

are often being taught in an unfamiliar culture by a teacher with unfamiliar pedagogical strategies, issues that will be addressed in Chapter Two.

Research questions

On one of the courses I tutor (Exploring Psychology) I have a preponderance of Dutch students, whilst on the other course (Child Development), Spanish and Portuguese students predominate. I noticed that Dutch students were more proactive, they initiated contact more frequently and were more questioning of the feedback they received; whereas Spanish and Portuguese students rarely initiated contact and were more reluctant to comment on feedback. Both courses were second level and so I concluded that the differences observed were not due to disparity in the level of material studied. Nor do the courses attract widely different students, as both are compulsory courses for a named degree in psychology. My 'theory-in-use' (Argyris and Schön 1974) was that cultural factors and academic traditions played a highly significant part in creating these differences.

In the light of the significant role feedback plays for my students, I wished to investigate how they learn from this feedback, and to examine the differences that ad hoc observations had led me to believe occur between the way British and CE students use and learn from feedback. I had also noticed that students experienced in the 'Anglo-Saxon' educational system seemed to be more adept at learning from feedback than those who had experienced an alternative system. Informal discussions with students indicated that it was not, as I first presumed, a matter of not understanding the language the feedback was written in, but a much more complex series of reasons concerning previous educational experience, especially at HE level, academic traditions, academic literacies and cultural factors.

These issues led me to generate three research questions:

- *How do CE students learn from their assignment feedback?*
- *Are there differences between the way native and non-native English speakers react, interact and learn from assignment feedback?*
- *How do CE ALs respond to the cultural diversity of their tutor groups?*

I wished to explore if British and CE students react, interact and learn differently from feedback and if they do, is this due to cultural differences, differences in academic experiences or some other factors. By 'react' I mean how do they feel about the feedback, and do these feelings encourage or discourage them using the feedback for learning. By 'interact' I mean what do they do with the feedback comments and does this influence whether or not they learn from it, i.e. do they read them, read and think about them, highlight parts, go back to the course text if directed, etc. When do they do this – immediately, before the next assignment? By 'learn', I was interested in what, and how they learn. Is it to do with course content, or skills such as essay writing, referencing, etc.; how do they learn, is it by thinking, highlighting, referring back to the feedback when completing their next assignment? The feedback could be the PT3 form, script comments or exemplars. Do students learn from one better than the other? With exemplars or model answers, do they understand why they are good examples?

The tendency to look at the world primarily from the perspective of your own culture and to believe it is superior to other cultures has been termed ethnocentrism by McCool (2009). Many teachers only have a hazy awareness that approaches to teaching and learning differ across cultural boundaries and even if they have an awareness, many believe they are *'justified in demanding that students adapt and*

ultimately conform to our culturally determined ways of teaching' (Leask 2006:193).

This however is at odds with a commitment to the principles of good teaching, Leask (2006) proposes that we should be just as concerned with adjusting our teaching to different learning styles as we are in expanding the students' learning strategies. In order for this to happen though, teachers need to recognise that their approach to teaching and learning is just as culturally determined as that of their students. I believe that CE ALs are a step ahead of the UK colleagues in this respect, and my third research question wished to investigate this.

I am aware that I alter my teaching and feedback depending on the student I am interacting with. Is this just individualised teaching or am I making judgements based on cultural factors? I wished to investigate the perceptions of my fellow ALs in CE with regard to how they respond to the cultural diversity of their groups and how this affects their teaching and feedback practices.

This research is important to me on various levels. It is important to me as a reflective practitioner as I strive to improve my practice. At a R09 Staff development conference in 2006 ALs requested help with '*Moderating groups with linguistic/cultural differences*' and '*How to handle students with different nationalities and cultures*' and suggested that the OU developed a '*pack to help ALs deal with diverse nationalities and to help students respond to an 'Anglo-Saxon university system'*' (Brussels Staff Development Weekend 2006), consequently I hope aspects of this research will be useful in helping CE ALs address these and other issues. Page 14 highlighted the increase in NNES OU students in many parts of the UK, therefore the pertinence of this research is also OU wide. Bailey (2004/5) considers that with regard to pedagogical research into international students affairs,

compared to Australia and the USA, UK HE lags behind and I hope this study will go some small way in helping to rectify this.

Definitions of important terms

Before concluding with an outline of the content of subsequent chapters I must define some important terms and explain some limitations I have imposed upon my research. Although the OU enrolls students worldwide this research is confined to students resident in CE, the OU uses the term CE to denote all member countries of the European Union (EU) outside the UK and Ireland, plus Switzerland and Slovenia. I have chosen to focus only on CE students as these are the students whom I, and my fellow CE ALs have in our tutor groups. At some points in this thesis, and particularly in Chapter Two I discuss international, rather than specifically CE students, this is because academic literature tends only to distinguish between home and international students. Morrison et al. (2005) indicate however, that authors' definitions of 'international' and 'home' student can vary considerably, giving an example that in the UK the distinction may be made on the basis of fee status. In this case 'home' students can include other EU students but in other contexts non-UK EU students may be classed as 'international'. Other researchers have used definitions based on domicile, nationality or immigration status.

Another important parameter is my use of the terms native English speaker/speaking (NES) and non-native English speaker/speaking (NNES). In classifying the students I have researched as NES or NNES, I have based the categorization on the student's statement as to whether or not they consider English their first language. A few students considered themselves bilingual in English and another language, and these I also classified as NES.

Throughout this thesis I have used the term 'AL' and 'tutor' interchangeably, which is in line with how the OU uses them. The OU does not refer to ALs as 'teachers', as in the OU it is the study materials that are seen as doing the 'teaching', not the tutor. Lentell (2003) suggests that within DL the 'tutor' has habitually been seen as only a marker, a giver of feedback, this is generally true also in the OU, except that ALs also act as the interface between the course materials and the student, and are on hand to help students interpret the course materials.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an introduction to my research by explaining its focus and has given some background information on the history of the OU and how it functions in CE, so as to explain the context within which I work as an AL in Italy. Given the multinational groups of students that I, and my fellow CE ALs tutor, the research questions outlined in Chapter One are highly pertinent to our work. The following chapter will delve deeper into the wider context of the issues of feedback and its importance to student learning. The chapter will also consider the international student in HE, including some cultural and educational factors that may influence why these students react in the way they do, it will also highlight the scarcity of research where these two themes overlap, and in so doing, develop the theoretical framework for my study.

Chapter Three explores issues surrounding the methodology used and some of the assumptions that underpin the research approach I have chosen. Chapter Four outlines the methods of data collection I employed i.e. a survey and telephone interviews, and considers how the data were manipulated i.e. collated, transcribed and analysed. Chapter Five presents an analysis of the data collected both from the

student survey and the student and AL telephone interviews. Chapter Six evaluates the data analysed in the previous chapter and makes links with the theory and research presented in Chapter Two. The final chapter, Chapter Seven, reaches a number of conclusions. I reflect on my experiences of conducting the study and suggest how aspects of the research could have been done differently. I also outline the relevance for practice that this study has. Finally, I suggest areas for further research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Introduction

Chapter One covered some specific background on the OU and my role as an AL in Italy, tutoring groups comprised of numerous international students. Giving feedback on assignments is one of the main teaching methods used by OU ALs and so this chapter begins by exploring the importance of feedback to student learning and discussing research that has investigated students' responses to feedback. As this study is concerned with the use made of feedback by CE OU students, the second half of this chapter will focus on some of the problems experienced by international students, particularly when studying at a distance. The conceptual framework behind my research is that of investigating the ways international students respond to feedback, in particular, examining the influence of language, culture and previous educational experience, on the receiving of feedback in the distance teaching context. The analogy of international students being players in a new and unfamiliar game (Manning 2004; Carrol and Appleton 2007) is the key theme running through this thesis. In the following sections I will illustrate how the rules of the '*learning from feedback game*' are often not fully understood by native speakers and that international students, initially playing by a different set of 'rules', heavily influenced by culture and previous academic experience, often find themselves in a unique situation that is frequently not acknowledged and needs further investigation if the goal of internationalizing HE is to be achieved.

The importance of feedback

it's [Italian HE] completely different, you don't have a feedback, you study on your own, you don't get the feedback for what you've learnt (Maria, Italian graduate/OU undergraduate)

I remember the feedback, it has always stuck in my mind because the teacher wrote on this book that I'd made. She wrote something like ... this helps me to remember, what semiotics is all about, it was a very positive feedback. (Angela, Australian graduate/OU undergraduate)

These quotations from students interviewed for this study illustrate two ends of a spectrum – those for whom teacher feedback is, and always has been, an integral part of learning and those for whom it is a totally new experience. More than twenty years ago Rowntree (1987:24) claimed that feedback *'is the life blood of learning'* and this is certainly true at the OU, where the feedback given on pieces of assessed coursework, forms one of the major aspects of its teaching. All assessments lead to some kind of student learning (Boud 1995), but the challenge for the teacher is to stimulate the right kind of learning. A number of meta-analyses have confirmed the centrality of feedback to student learning (Hattie et al. 1996; Black and Wiliam 1998; Hattie and Jaeger 1998) with Hattie (1987) concluding that the most powerful single influence affecting achievement was feedback. Ramsden (2003) argues that effective comments on students' work represent one of the key characteristics of quality teaching and Hounsell (2003:67) notes that *'we learn faster, and much more effectively, when we have a clear sense of how well we are doing and what we might need to do in order to improve.'*

In an ODL institution like the OU, feedback on assignments, (which makes up 50% of the overall course grade), has both formative and summative functions. In education, feedback is commonly conceptualised as serving both 'evaluative' and 'educative' functions (Dochy and McDowell 1997). In terms of evaluation, feedback provides a student with information concerning their performance on an assessment

task (Hounsell 1987). From an educative perspective, feedback facilitates students' development (Hester 2001) and may be essential for effective learning (Reiser and Dick 1996).

But what exactly is feedback? Ramaprasad (1983:4), although writing in the realm of management theory, put forward a useful definition: *'feedback is information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way'*. It has been acknowledged that the feedback process is not a simple one. It can have multiple functions, such as advice on improvement of current or future assignments, and explaining or justifying a grade (Carless 2006). Feedback is not only of value to the student, it may also be used by tutors to demonstrate expertise, diligence or authority (Carless 2006). At the very minimum it can *'be little more than the fulfilment of a ritual which is part of academic life'* and both students and tutors may not be fully aware of which of these functions, or combination of functions, is being evoked at any one time (Carless 2006:220). ALs invest a great deal of time in providing detailed feedback but what is the impact of feedback on students, and how might they relate it to further learning?

Student use of feedback

Assessment at campus universities takes many forms, from individual written work to laboratory assignments to group presentations. Likewise the feedback may vary both in format and method of presentation. The originator of the feedback may also vary, with peer feedback supplementing teacher feedback in some institutions. The OU lacks this variety due to the distance inherent in the DL context. OU students are constrained to produce assignments that can be submitted at a distance and ALs must provide written feedback that can be processed and monitored by the university.

Feedback within the OU, therefore, has a permanence that may be lacking at campus universities, where some feedback may just consist of a casual conversation between student and teacher.

Despite the vital impact that feedback has on learning, this is a relatively underexplored area (Higgins et al. 2002). In particular Weaver (2006) notes that limited research has focused on student perceptions of the value and usefulness of feedback. Feedback alone will not promote learning, students need to engage with it and act upon it (Gibbs and Simpson 2004), but do students actually do this? Students and teachers often have differing perceptions of feedback, Carless (2006) reports two differing perceptions as being: (1) Tutors believed that they were providing more detailed feedback than students did and (2) Tutors perceived their feedback to be more useful than students did. A point reinforced by Maclellan (2001) whose survey revealed that while most teachers responded that feedback frequently helped both understanding and learning, most students responded that feedback was only sometimes helpful in these ways.

Fleming (1999) argues that marking student assignments is one of the significant quality events in the lives of students and academics but research by Hyland (2001) suggests that although tutors spend hours correcting assignments, they are unsure about their feedback's usefulness or whether it is actually used. Certainly within the OU marking assignments is a time consuming (for the AL) and costly (for the OU) business. Given this, it is important to be confident that the feedback is effective. In practice most ALs believe (hope?) that their students read and learn from their feedback, but is this belief justified? Burke (2008:1) disagrees, stating '*in relation to feedback it appears that student learning comes to a full stop on receipt of tutor*

feedback; the grade shows how well they have done and that is it', a point echoed by Carless (2006) who noted that students seemed to use feedback only for grading and not for learning. The return of OU feedback, either by post or electronically ensures that all students receive it. Those who receive feedback through the eTMA system, though, can access just the mark without opening the file containing the written comments, which may be a significant negative factor, as Winter and Dye (2004:136) propose that *'Students do not see the value of feedback if they have their grade ... the grade IS the feedback'*. Others suggest students throw feedback away after looking at the mark if they dislike the grade (Wotjas 1998) or that students will only read the feedback if the grade is outside their expectations (Davies and Wrighton 2003/4), which confirms the importance of the mark to students. But again these studies have taken place at campus universities where students have other means to monitor their learning.

Weaver (2006:391), in discussing this, concludes that the claim by some academics that students do not *'bother with feedback'* has some legitimacy and suggests that this may be so either because the feedback fails to guide or motivate students, or because students' lack of understanding of academic discourse makes interpretation difficult. This latter aspect was reinforced by Lea and Street (1998) who found that even if feedback is read, it is often not understood. Several studies have investigated students' difficulties in understanding and acting upon feedback (Chanock 2000; Higgins et al. 2001, 2002). Price and O'Donovan (2006) however, propose that students' apparent lack of interest in feedback does not tally with research findings that show that they want more, and more effective feedback (Higgins et al. 2002). Does the problem then lie with the students, or with the type and quality of feedback tutors give? Burke (2008) maintains that the problem may lie with the way we give

students feedback, treating them as passive rather than active recipients in the process.

Passivity may be a key issue but there are many factors that need to be teased out here. Is the belief that students are mainly interested in, and motivated by marks and consequently disinterested in feedback true? As mentioned above the importance of grades to students has been well established, but contrary to tutors' beliefs and evidence from within associated literature (Hounsell 1987; Lea and Street 1998; Ding 1998; Wotjas 1998), students maintain that they do pay attention to feedback, but often do not act on it (Brown and Glover 2006).

Weaver's (2006) study indicates that students recognise the value of feedback in improving their learning but they find it difficult to put this recognition into practice. It could be that students interpret the term 'feedback' literally and use it only to look back on work they have completed, and are not aware or able to use it to 'feed-forward' and contribute to their ongoing development (Chanock 2000). Students want to improve and engage with tutors' responses to their work, but have difficulty in translating comments into future improvements in different assignments (Carless 2006). For feedback to promote learning it is important that students receive feedback that is both timely and feeds forward into future work.

Difficulties in accessing feedback

Most of the research on feedback to students has focused on the input side of the equation, what is provided, how it is provided and when. However, how the student interprets and deals with feedback is also of critical importance.

Obviously if students are to use feedback then they must first understand it. Studies report students' difficulty in 'making sense' of comments (Norton and Norton 2001; Millar 2008). Higgins (2000:1) argues that, '*many students are simply unable to understand feedback comments and interpret them correctly.*' Possibly, he suggests, because feedback is generally delivered in academic discourse which students may not have full access to. The 'discourse' being the language which the tutor uses to structure what is said and how it is said, something which is rarely explicitly recognised or discussed (McCune 2004). The problem may also be compounded in today's world of modular and joint degrees, and 'stand alone' OU courses, where students encounter many different disciplines, subject areas and tutors, each of which may have differing requirements and use differing discourses (Ecclestone and Swann 1999; Hartley and Chesworth 2000). The implications are that the value of feedback will be dependent upon the student's understanding of particular academic discourses and so those who do not share a similar understanding of academic discourse, or 'play by the same rules' as their tutor could experience difficulty in understanding and using the feedback.

Teachers hold assumptions that students' will be able to interpret their comments in the way they were intended. Research on academic discourse (e.g. Hounsell, 1995; Lea and Street, 2000) indicates that these assumptions may be mistaken. Lea and Street (1998) and Stierer (2000) propose that what is 'clear' to tutors may be far from 'clear' to students, although they were focusing on differences in what counts as knowledge and argument between discipline areas, this point may also be related to feedback (Mutch 2003:35). The problem is not only confined to feedback. If students do not understand the taken-for-granted academic discourse that underpins the language of feedback (Hounsell 1987) then they will not understand assessment

criteria either. Hounsell (1987) suggests that this failure to understand both feedback comments, and the assessment criteria on which the comments are based, inhibits the possibility of feedback being used in a formative manner.

Much research has indicated that miscommunication frequently occurs in conventional educational settings (Hyland 1998; Cohen and Cavalcanti 1990). The lack of face-to-face contact in DL may mean that the potential for misinterpretation is even higher. Associated with the issue of incomprehension/miscommunication are the strategies that teachers may use to soften criticism, for example the use of hedging devices. The cultural 'rules of the game' in Anglo-Saxon education tend to be that direct personal criticism is avoided, teachers preferring to use constructive criticism and suggestions for improvement (Siepmann 2006), with a key point being that the student should be '*built up, not put down*' (Galtung 1981:823). This is in opposition to the Gallic and Teutonic practices in which '*no attempt will be made to mop up the blood and put wounded egos together*' (Galtung 1981:825).

Hyland and Hyland (2001) conducted a small study and discovered that many of the criticisms and suggestions the teachers used were mitigated by the use of hedging devices, question forms, and personal attribution and this caused some students to fail to understand their teachers' comments due to their indirectness. If this strategy is a widely used one, this may have ramifications for NNES students who are reading their feedback in what to them is a foreign language, teachers who are indirect and 'subtle' may actually cause significant misunderstandings. In fact a cross-cultural analysis of journal articles by Trumpp (1998 as cited in Siepmann 2006) found that English reviews contained many more hedges than German or French reviews. Kruetz and Harres (1997:181) have investigated the distribution and function of

hedging in English and German academic writing and discovered that English writers frequently '*down tone and mitigate argument and assertions*'. Down toners such as 'I hope' or 'it is hoped that' are frequently used in English, in contrast to German writing, which is more direct and explicit (Johns 1998).

Burke (2008) points out that there is a vast array of literature on the importance of feedback and guidance for staff on modes of commentary, but only passing references are paid to studies on how students use feedback. Teachers assume that students are familiar with feedback and know how to act upon it, but Weaver (2006) reports that three-quarters of students she surveyed maintained that prior to commencing university they had not received any guidance on using feedback. This also continued once students were at university, with half the students believing they had received no guidance on how to read and use feedback. Results from an internal survey of feedback practices by Burke (2008:2) revealed that academics presume that students know what to do with feedback and consequently do not concern themselves with this issue, other than to advise students to '*read comments*', if this is common practice then it is not surprising that misinterpretations occur.

The affective domain

This chapter has illustrated the unquestionably vital role that feedback plays in learning. The assessment process is a deeply emotional one (Boud 1995), students invest not only their time but also themselves in assignments, and the feedback that tutors give engages them both on a cognitive and emotional level. Receiving feedback consequently often generates strong emotions which influence the way in which students are able to receive and process feedback. Race (1995:67) even suggests that sometimes the value of feedback may be '*eclipsed by learners*

reactions' to it. Within the DL environment these issues may have even more importance, at campus universities students are able to share feelings with other students and in some cases academic staff, the distance inherent in DL precludes much of this emotional support.

HE teachers have tended to focus almost exclusively on their students' cognitive system which '*is designed for knowledge and skill acquisition*' (Boekaerts 1993), to the detriment of acknowledging affective aspects. Recent research (Varlander 2008) however, has focused on the connection between learning and emotions. Varlander (2008) suggests that until recently the role of emotion and learning has been a largely unexplored and undervalued area in HE. This is disappointing considering the powerful role emotions can play in both encouraging and inhibiting effective learning.

Wooten (2002:353) writes about the negative impact of assessment on students and whether the system exists '*to encourage learning or to measure failure.*' As indicated previously feedback has the potential to be misinterpreted, which impacts on the students' ability to learn from it. Another serious misinterpretation that may occur is that the feedback may be interpreted by students as being a judgement of themselves instead of their work. Feedback should focus on students' performance, on their learning and on actions under their control, rather than on the students themselves and on their characteristics (Gibbs and Simpson 2002). This is supported in the literature on formative assessment which distinguishes between feedback which tells students they are hopeless or achieving poorly and feedback which tells students exactly where they have gone wrong and what they can do about it. The focusing of critical feedback on personal characteristics can be demotivating and negatively affect

students' 'self-efficacy', or sense of competence. Gibbs and Simpson (2002) point out that in contrast to marks, feedback concerning content provides the student with options for action and is less closely associated with their ego – it is about their action (something under their control) rather than about themselves.

Young's (2000) research, which specifically focuses on mature students, is of particular relevance to the OU, where many students are 'mature'. She draws attention to the emotional impact of receiving feedback, commenting that tutors should not underestimate the effect that feedback can have on students' development, academic confidence, self esteem and emotional stability. She also highlights an added twist, that the student's initial level of self-esteem also affects their interpretation of the feedback, those with low self-esteem tend to interpret all feedback as a judgement of ability, whilst those with high self-esteem do not. Individual variation in the interpretation of feedback has also been noted by others, with Carless (2006) suggesting that what one student sees as helpful suggestion may be interpreted by another as judgemental criticism. His data also reveal the interaction between student characteristics and the emotional impact of assessment and feedback. He concludes that *'better students are more receptive to feedback, because of their greater confidence and better understanding of what good performance entails; for the weaker student feedback carries more risk of being discouraging and/or misunderstood'* (p230). Unpicking the intricate interconnections between a student's reaction to feedback and their underlying emotional state, cultural reactions and understanding of the both the semantics and pragmatics of the feedback is complex as much relies on individual factors.

The power teachers have over students must not be forgotten. Boud (1995:43) encapsulates this well when he writes: *'We judge too much and too powerfully, not realising the extent to which students experience our power over them'*. When it comes to assessment and feedback teachers do a lot of 'judging'. Language may also be synonymous with power and this coupled with the power already invested in tutors as the givers of summative feedback means that in the eyes of students ALs are incredibly powerful. Foucault (as cited in Smart 1985:72) maintains that power is associated with discourse and as we have seen on page 28 access to academic discourse can be problematic for students, particular NNEs who are familiar with different power-discourse relationships. Of key importance here is the relationship between power and knowledge, which Foucault sees as inextricably interdependent, teachers have the power to allow or withhold knowledge and one of the ways that they can do this is through feedback.

Feedback and non-native English speakers

With regard to giving feedback to NNEs, several texts (Ryan 2000; Carrol and Appleton 2007; Carrol 2005) supply guidelines, but much of the advice given is rather general i.e. to word-process rather than handwrite comments; to provide feedback promptly; to make assessment criteria explicit. Brown and Joughin (2007:69) suggest that *'good practice for international students is good practice for all'*, an admirable comment but specific cultural issues, mentioned previously, such as the place of criticism, the use of hedging devices, etc., need to be specifically addressed. Very little research on DL students' response to feedback has taken place, and what has occurred has tended to focus on language learning feedback rather than subject based feedback. Hyland (2000) however has counselled that writing in a first and a second language are not the same, and that appropriate teaching practices from

one situation may not necessarily be transferable from one to another and consequently subject teachers' feedback may need to focus on different issues with these students. The dearth of research in this area is at the heart of this study and I hope my findings will illuminate how international DL students interact and learn from their feedback.

The first part of this literature review considered the importance of feedback in promoting student learning. It also looked at research that has investigated what students do with the feedback they receive and how they react to, and learn from this feedback. The majority of OU CE students are not NESs and so the second part of this literature review will consider these students and whether their diverse cultural and language backgrounds impinge on the way in which they engage with feedback.

The influence of diverse cultural backgrounds

'They said it was hide'n seek but it wasn't, it was sorta like tag'

This was said by a tearful seven-year-old who had just arrived in Italy from the UK and had been playing with a group of Italian children in the local park. In the UK the rule is that you hide until you are found, in Italy what seemed by name, 'nascondino', to be the same game, was played by different rules that initially involved hiding, and then running to touch 'home' without being seen and named by the seeker. This idea of things appearing, at first impression, to be similar in different countries but in fact having quite subtle and/or profound rule differences that actually impede communication, is something that unpins the whole of this research.

Much informal discussion goes on between ALs concerning CE students and in 1995 an AL proposed a two-dimensional matrix which acknowledged the interaction between language and educational background, leading to at least four distinct types of OU student:

<i>1. English first (or only language) Educated within UK</i>	<i>3. English second (or additional) language Educated within UK</i>
<i>2. English first (or only) language Educated outside UK</i>	<i>4. English second (or additional) language Educated outside UK</i>

Figure 2.1 Interaction between language and educational background

Source: Breet (1995) as cited in Manning and Mayor (1999)

Although a little too categorical in seeing students as either native or non-native speakers and ignoring those who are bi- or multilingual, this matrix does raise awareness in ALs that students are not a homogeneous group. It also provides a framework for the ‘rules of the game’ analogy referred to previously. Manning first proposed this analogy within the OU when she wrote:

One could compare the studying of an UKOU course with a game. A ‘UK’ student with a ‘UK’ tutor either knows the game or can be taught (or reminded of) the rules fairly readily. Any misunderstanding about the rules can be checked (albeit at a distance) and further explanation communicated with little more ado. Expertise can develop quickly. ... With the student from a different cultural and educational background and the ‘UK’ tutor, the game and its rules may either be completely unfamiliar or the student is used to playing a similar game with very different rules. (Manning 2004:8)

If ALs are aware that students may be playing 'the game' by different rules then this awareness can enable them to point out rule differences and clarify difficulties. CE ALs are generally aware of the different rules the nationals of their country of residence may be playing by. They may also have an awareness that nationals of other countries may play by different rules, but may have no idea what these rules might be. The most serious difficulties occur though, when *'the tutor assumes that the student knows the game and the rules for playing it'* (Manning 2004:8), something that many UK based tutors may assume. Allied to this is the concept of 'ethnocentrism'. This concept, defined by McCool (2009:101) as *'looking at the world through one's culture with the tendency to believe some or all of its parts are superior to other cultures.'* ALs may believe, either due to ignorance or lack of experience, that the Anglo-Saxon model of education is also the predominant model 'on the continent', and this may lead them to falsely believe that CE students know the rules of the HE game. Even if tutors are aware that the Anglo-Saxon model is not the predominant one in CE, they may still be ethnocentric and believe that their own educational philosophies and pedagogic approaches are the 'right' ones.

The obvious way of overcoming rule differences is to explain them, but explanations rely on language. Language permeates all aspects of education and forms a vital interface between teachers and students. The language difficulties of international students is an issue of considerable concern in UK HE and much has been written about this area (e.g. McNamara and Harris, 1997). A proportion of international students (i.e. from the USA, Australia, India, Uganda) may consider English their native language, and many will not, apart from some minor adjustments, experience any language difficulties when studying in the UK. Some of this group however (e.g. from India), may find that what is standard English in their home country is not

standard in the UK. They may find they are not easily understood, when in fact they consider themselves to be bi- or even monolingual. This is connected with the phenomenon of 'world Englishes' and the distinction between what have been described as outer circle countries (i.e. India, Nigeria, where English was a colonial language) and inner circle countries (UK, Australia, USA). New varieties of English have evolved in the outer circle countries, this English possess the common core characteristics of the inner varieties but can be distinguished by particular lexical, phonological, pragmatic and morphosyntactic innovations (Brown 1995), and this may lead to language difficulties for these students when studying in the UK. Other students, while not considering themselves to be native speakers, do believe that they have a very good grasp of the language, and can be shocked when they encounter language difficulties. Often they will have achieved success at using English in their home countries but may not have understood what is involved in writing, thinking and talking in English at degree level.

It is not only with the vocabulary and syntax of the language that international students experience problems. NESs often use allusions and references which are culturally specific and this can cause confusion. Cammish (1997) illustrates this with an example of a lecturer discussing selective education who referred to separating sheep from goats and was asked by a puzzled student what farming had to do with educational organization.

Much attention has been given in the literature to language issues and while it is important for tutors to be aware of the daunting challenge of learning through the medium of a second language, and that there is no doubt that some international students do need specific help with their English language skills, to see the difficulties

experienced by international students as arising solely from language problems is an over simplification, as the issue is a much wider one than language alone. There is the hidden curriculum of the language of discourse, nicely illustrated by Lewis's (1984:100) quotation from an Italian postgraduate student: '*we used language as an alibi. There were other difficulties of communication, but we blamed the language.*'

When marking the work of international students merely refraining from deducting marks for poor grammar and spelling does not address problems of intellectual self-censorship, when a student cannot express a complex idea, then that idea will not occur in the student's work (Harris 1995). Ballard and Clanchy (1997) have developed this concept further, suggesting that not only may international students write down only those points they can express in English, they even do this when they know they are not really answering the question. Ballard (1991) reinforces this by suggesting that rather than focusing on improving grammar or vocabulary, it is more effective to help students think about their ideas in order to increase their capacity to write what they mean.

Manning and Mayor (1999) point out that irrespective of whether or not they are NESs, many students enter the OU lacking experience of academic language, academic conventions and the discourses of specific disciplines and these things may effectively be a 'foreign language' to them. Consequently students who are both NNEs and from a non Anglo-Saxon educational background (the forth quadrant of Breet's matrix in Figure 2.1, p.35), may be doubly disadvantaged. Two ALs, Le Mare and Tuffs (1995) reported some of the particular problems which may arise for OU students in this situation, these students may:

- *lack familiarity with Anglo-Saxon academic writing and in particular with the informal 'genre' of OU texts;*
- *be influenced by what is considered 'correct' academic style in their first language/language of education;*
- *have an unclear perception of academic tasks;*
- *have learned to approach the subject differently or to reason differently;*
- *lack the particular English vocabulary of the subject under discussion;*
- *not recognise or understand the British cultural context;*
- *not feel comfortable in an informal relationship with the tutor;*
- *take much more than the recommended time to complete readings/coursework etc.*

(Le Mare and Tuffs, 1995 as cited in Manning and Mayor 1999:4)

How do these issues impact on international students? Brennan (1997:69) suggests that unlike students coming from former colonies who may have experienced similar educational traditions, students from Europe have often experienced very different HE systems and traditions from those used in the UK. Van Vught, (1993) makes an important point, where he cautions that in so far as it is justifiable to speak about continental European and Anglo-Saxon traditions of HE, HE in the UK stands apart from most other European systems. Each national system of HE has distinctive features and differences in the pedagogical approach used. It is suggested that within the UK international students see HE institutions as characterised by:

strong emphasis on independent work and out of class communication between teaching staff and students, by the important role of written exams and the evaluation of papers

submitted, and by little use of publications in foreign languages.
(Teichler 1994:22).

This is quite different from French universities which are said to place strong emphasis on the acquisition of facts; require regular class attendance; encourage dependence on teachers by allowing students little choice or autonomy and for there to be little out of class communication with teachers. German universities on the contrary appear to place great emphasis on student freedom and independence, and are concerned less with regular class attendance than with the understanding of theories, concepts and paradigms (Teichler 1994).

Diverse academic traditions

The above relates to the concept of 'academic culture' - the cultural norms and expectations involved in academic activity. Academic cultures are systems of beliefs, expectations and cultural practices about how to perform academically. For those initiated, many aspects (rules of the game), seem obvious, but they are rarely made explicit. As Carrol (2005:45) points out, rather than think '*aha, he's using a different discourse style*', the UK tutor may rather think '*He's waffling*'. In investigating cross-cultural differences in thought and writing patterns Siepmann (2006:132) proposes a culture-specificity of cognitive and textural structures. He maintains that analysis of academic disciplines and text type indicates a '*subtly differentiated picture of cross cultural difference*'. Galtung (1981) also outlines different approaches to culture and intellectual style in a discussion of four styles: Saxonic, Teutonic, Gallic and Nipponic. He suggests that Saxonic academic culture encourages debate in relatively more socially equal relationships and favours empirical approaches to research. Siepmann (2006) suggests that it is due to the

significance of tutorials and seminars in the Anglo-Saxon academic culture that reader orientation and essay form are of the highest importance, but that provided the essay does not exhibit digression or repetition and follows the conventions of topic sentences, concluding sentences and smooth transitions, a degree of tolerance is apparent in academic writing. The Teutonic approach on the contrary is based more on master-disciple relationships, using deductive approaches which encourage students to follow logical implications rigorously. The focus of academic writing is more on the content and knowledge of subject matter rather than stylistic issues and there is a greater tolerance of digression (Siepmann 2006:134). The Gallic approach is also diverse, being horizontal in terms of relationships but favours non-deductive approaches; encourages pervasive eloquence and is preoccupied with linguistic artistry. Of extreme importance is the mastering of the accepted form of academic essay writing, which must respect both the rules of Académie Française's 'bon français' and display strict observance of the technical terms presented in specialised vocabulary books. Criticism is concealed behind a '*smoke screen of language*' (Siepmann 2006:133). Finally the Nipponic approach is based on hierarchical relations in which debate is dialectical and primarily social rather than intellectual.

A large amount of very specific research has shown that there are precise cultural differences in writing styles. Kaplan (1966/1980) in analysing paragraph movement in several languages concludes that within English writing, paragraphs are mostly linear and while the paragraph may be discursive it is not digressive, this is in contrast with French paragraph writing which is much more tolerant of digression. Clyne (1987) investigating cultural differences in discourse patterns in German and English texts discovered that German texts showed a greater degree of

digressiveness. Proposing that one of the major causes of this was the well defined function of digression to provide theory, historical background, etc.

There has however, been some criticism of the ideas put forward by Galtung and Clyne. Hutz (1997:67, as cited in Siepmann 2006) for example, accuses them of sometimes making '*sweeping oversimplifications*'. Although there may be some basis for these accusations and their findings may not apply to all writers of the cultures investigated, the research does point to common cultural tendencies. For example Trumpp (1998 as cited in Siepmann 2006) in comparing German, English and French Sports Science articles discovered significant differences in the use of topic and bridge sentences. Almost two-thirds of the English paragraphs examined started with a topic sentence whereas the findings for French (40%) and German (36%) were lower.

Bloor and Bloor (1991) suggest that German and Polish students' writing is much more direct than British, while Japanese is less direct. One reason they suggest for this is that in Polish there are no repetitions, paraphrasing and in text summaries that are essential in English, and because of this these students may frequently be told that their written work is not evaluative enough. It is not surprising then that international students experience problems in coping with the variety of assignments that may be expected of them, in understanding examination methods and assessment feedback, and developing appropriate study techniques, all things that they may have learnt a different set of rules for.

Todd (1997) argues that differences in academic cultures may lead international students into using study strategies that have worked for them in their home

countries, but which due to the factors mentioned above, no longer work for them in the UK system. As an example she suggests that many international students may have achieved past academic success by reproducing the words of their teacher and consequently may quote their lecturer in assignments and expect to be rewarded for this. Other international students may believe that there are 'correct' answers to all assignments and that they should be given these by their teachers and may become frustrated when this does not happen. Links here can be made to Hofstede and Hofstede's (2005) work on the uncertainty-avoidance dimension, for example where they indicate that Germans do not like uncertainty and prefer one right answer.

May et al. (1994) argue that genre provides a better starting point than syntax in relating education to language, and so academic literacies (Lea and Street 1998) is a key area that needs to be investigated both with respect to international and home students. A whole range of attitudes-to-knowledge can be found in the UK, both within and between institutions and in different disciplines. The rules of academic writing are often difficult for UK students, especially school leavers and May et al. (1994) found that some home students in Australia had just as much difficulty as international students in coming to grips with issues such as being critical and analytical. Todd (1997) suggests that cultures may express criticism in a different way and Bloor and Bloor (1991) point out that it may not be enough to ask students to write in a more critical way but that we may need to give them more detailed help about exactly how to discuss, and how to be critical. Shaw (1995) further asserts that what is crucial is not so much telling students how to structure a thesis as helping them to become, or at least sound like, an insider in the game (discipline) and that this entails different ways of signalling knowledge and the necessity of learning a new set of rules.

Having lived and worked in Italy for the last fourteen years, this is the CE country in which I have had most experience. A frequent topic of conversation amongst both my AL colleagues and fellow English teachers, are the differences between the Italian and UK educational systems and how this produces students who behave in a different manner from the one the teacher expects. Jane Sherman, an ex-OU AL, who also works within the Italian university system, encapsulates some of the different ways that Italian students react:

They gave verbatim answers. ... lifting their answers verbatim from the text, instead of adapting, reducing, or rewording them as I expected. They learned things by heart for exams... and wheeled it out (almost unstoppably) without regard to appropriateness of context or subject. They plagiarized ... they failed to name their sources and quoted from the sources extensively without acknowledgement. They did not argue ... they did not organize their writing to reflect a sequential argument

(Sherman 1992:190).

In investigating the causes of this she found aspects of the Italian education system that explained several of these traits. Homework and examinations at all levels are very text-based and she reports that students are expected to memorize passages and set books, which may encourage students to paraphrase, '*They feel the word is what is wanted*' (p192). A further significant factor is that for many university courses there is only one textbook, often written by the lecturer/examiner who expects to have their own work repeated to them in the examination. Sherman further points out that English academic writing is basically argumentative and postulates that Italian students lack experience with this sort of structure. Rather than evaluate or argue, her students presented information and descriptions. She suggests that

constructing an argument is not part of the Italian 'game' and that even the '*tesi di laurea*', the thesis which is the final part of the first degree, is not expected to have an argument but is information based (Sherman 1992:192). A lot of weight conversely is given to style and grammatical correctness, as in the French system (Siepmann 2006).

There is evidence that CE students registered with the OU generally have a higher level of previous educational attainment than UK students (Shipley 2001). But in spite of this, it has often been commented upon by ALs that CE students with HE experience frequently bemoan the fact that they had been highly successful in their own educational system but have barely scraped through their first OU assignments. To continue with the game analogy, these students may well be trying to play the OU game by the rules they learnt for successfully playing the HE game in their home country.

Flower and Hayes (1981) also propose a model of the behaviour of writers in which they described writers as exhibiting coherent underlying structures i.e. that certain kinds of behaviour appear in patterns. For example deductive or inductive discourse patterns can vary in different academic traditions. These are concerned with whether the main idea is introduced first followed by background and supporting arguments or vice versa. Cortazzi and Jin (1997:81) point out that '*British tutors prefer the former whereas in Confucian writing the whole is outlined before the parts, reason is given before results, causes are shown before effects, the background is foregrounded.*' They say that British tutors in contrast expect an early signal of where the argument is going or they may consider the writing 'unclear' or 'waffling'. Tutors expect students to get to the main point quickly, they often anticipate a clear overview to show the

direction of the discourse right at the beginning. Background information or supporting evidence can then follow since the reader already has a good idea of the main point and it will be clear how this background is relevant. Each discourse pattern is valid, but can be wrongly perceived by another who is used to a different pattern, for example main points may be missed by someone who expects them to be elsewhere.

Closely entwined with these issues of previous academic experiences is the issue of culture. Cortazzi and Jin (1997) draw attention to the hidden assumptions about culture that infuse communication and learning such as the norms and expectations of the UK educational system. Many researchers (e.g. Harris 1995) have pointed out how culture shapes cognition and learning but that this area has received relatively little attention. People do not just carry cultural behaviour and concepts into the classroom, they also use the specific framework of their cultures to interpret and assess other peoples' words, actions and academic performance.

Of relevance to this study is the seminal cross cultural research of Hofstede (1980, 1983) that provides an empirical framework on national culture. Hofstede surveyed IBM employees across 50 countries and 3 multi-country regions and from this identified four cultural dimensions: individualism versus collectivism, which explores how the individual relates to the group; power-distance, which examines how inequality is experienced; uncertainty-avoidance, which explores the manner in which cultures deal with the uncertainty of everyday life; and masculinity-femininity which is concerned with the nature of social values as either nurturing or competitive. Hofstede suggests that particular positions along cultural dimensions have implications for teaching and learning. For example '*Germans like structured*

learning situations with precise objectives, detailed assignments and strict timetables. They like situations with one correct answer that they can find. They expect to be rewarded for accuracy' (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005:178).

Greece and Portugal are situated towards the collectivist end of Hofstede's individualism-collectivism continuum, a factor which Manning (2004) links to these two countries having the highest failure rates amongst OU CE students. She suggests that the OU, in espousing the normal UK educational practice of expecting students to be able to express their own opinions and argue a point, puts any students who have no experience of this type of educational system at a disadvantage. The disadvantage is magnified in those from collectivist cultures, (such as Greece and Portugal), who are not encouraged to have personal opinions.

The power-distance dimension is significant when considering the relationships between students and tutors. In cultures with a high power-distance value such as France teachers are treated with respect, the educational process is teacher centred with the teacher initiating all communication, students only speak when invited to and teachers are never publicly criticised or contradicted. Conversely where the power-distance value is small, such as in the UK and Scandinavia, teachers and students are more equal, students are supposed to ask teachers questions and argument and debate is acceptable and even encouraged (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005).

A country's position on the uncertainty-avoidance dimension may be influential on how students interpret feedback. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005:179) suggest that *'German students are brought up in the belief that anything which is easy enough for them to understand is dubious and probably unscientific'*; so a UK tutor's efforts to

make their feedback as clear and unambiguous as possible, (the UK is a weak uncertainty-avoidance country), may be viewed by a German, French or Italian student as rendering the feedback shallow and lacking substance and perhaps even unbelievable. Conversely students from weak uncertainty-avoidance countries like the UK or Scandinavia respect teachers who use plain language.

Although Hofstede's framework is a useful way of looking at cross-cultural differences and may help illuminate some of the problems that international students encounter in DL, the empirical validity of Hofstede's framework has been extensively critiqued (Shackleton and Ali 1990; Sondergaard 1994; Yoo and Donthu 1998). Criticisms have concerned the generalisability of his findings, as his sample was drawn from only one large multinational company and that the country differences may have been '*confounded by the homogenising influence of a dominant corporate culture that traverses national boundaries*' (Evans and Mavondo 2001). Yoo and Donthu (1998) have also suggested that the dimensions of national culture may be a product of the period of the study, and Cordeiro (2007) suggests that it assumes that national territories are the limits that culture corresponds to. Nevertheless, I and other OU staff in frequent contact with students from various European countries, do find that aspects of Hofstede's research resonates with the personal theories that we have generated through our practice as OU ALs. It can also help explain why ALs might unconsciously rewards students for their 'cultural capital', that is their facility with language and expression, or reward students who use a style similar to the tutor's own (Ballard and Clanchy 1997).

Assessment is a further area where CE students may come to the OU having had different experiences or having played by different rules. For example coursework

may be a novel experience for many students, as Bailey (2004/5) reports that in many countries the main form of assessment is the end-of-year examination, which in CE, according to De Vita and Case (2003), often takes the format of an oral assessment. Cortazzi and Jin (1997) report that many Eastern European university examinations are oral. Students give oral presentations on a topic selected at random from a published list, as a consequence the written 'essay style' examinations, (as favoured in the UK), for these students are a completely novel experience, which may lead to answers written in a loose and unorganised style that look insufficiently planned because they are based on oral communication patterns (Ryan 2000). Even when coursework is assessed written feedback may not be the norm. Ormshaw (2007) points out that at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland the only essay feedback students received was the numerical grade. Grades and grade boundaries can also cause confusion, for example Ryan (2000) comments on the disappointment some students from America and Australia may express on receiving marks in the 60-70% range, being used to scoring 80-90% in their home country, and Brown and Joughin (2007) report pass-fail boundaries as being 70 or 80% for some subjects in Scandinavia.

Conclusion

The literature discussed in this chapter illustrates that in the two disparate areas of this study – feedback and international students, there has been a fair amount of research. Research on feedback has tended to look at student opinion of feedback and give advice to teachers on how to provide feedback in the most apposite manner. Very little research has actually considered how students interact with their feedback to further their learning. Research on international students has almost exclusively focused on foreign students resident in their country of instruction and has considered

issues concerned with students living and working in their new country of residence. International DL students have always tended to be few in number, but with the advent of new methods of expedite communication, distance is no longer a problem and potentially students from all over the world have the opportunity to study at a distance. This study is concerned with the specific area where these two topics intersect, namely how international students in a DL situation interact with, and learn from their feedback.

Chapter 3 – Research Methodology

Introduction

Chapter Two discussed the various influences that may affect the ways in which students interact with, and learn from their feedback. As this study focused on students studying in CE, I also considered factors that may impinge upon international students and how these may influence the way they learn from feedback. In this chapter I will explain my choice of research methodology. I felt that positivist, quantitative research methods that test hypotheses against empirical data would not be appropriate, as my research is not dealing with certainties and undisputed facts that produce objective scientific knowledge but rather with phenomena that can be investigated and interpreted in different ways (Burgess et al. 2006). As I was not dealing with absolutes but with fluid social constructions I used an interpretivist paradigm. According to interpretivism there are no absolutes but many ways that phenomena can be studied and interpreted, as the interpretation is dependent upon the meaning that people attribute to the phenomena under investigation (Burgess et al. 2006).

This chapter will consider several important matters beginning with the significance of the researcher's voice and reflexivity. In thinking about my research questions and the diverse data I intended to collect it became apparent that I would need to use a variety of data collection methods, such as surveying and telephone interviewing, which will also be discussed in this chapter.

Prior to deciding upon the use of surveys and telephone interviewing I considered using 'Think-aloud protocols'. This method was first used to generate data in

usability testing product design and development (Lewis and Reiman 1993) and has also been used in studies within psychology, education and foreign language learning. Think-aloud protocols involve participants thinking aloud as they perform a set of specified tasks, and I considered asking students to do this as they opened and read feedback, and ALs to do it while composing TMA feedback. Using a think-aloud protocol would have allowed me to investigate first-hand a student's reaction to, and interpretation of feedback and also to access ALs' thought process while composing feedback. After investigating the practicalities of the method I decided that it was too complex and expensive to put into practice. I would have needed several 'dictaphones/MP3 players' with which to make the recordings and the logistics of training participants in the processes, and delivering and returning the equipment to several European countries within the timespan of the EdD programme mitigated against this approach.

The researcher's voice

Merton (1972) defines an insider as an individual who, due to their previous and ongoing association with a community, has close and confidential knowledge of that community and its members. I am an insider in several ways in my research, being both an OU AL and an OU student. The insider-outsider debate in qualitative research has a long history. Traditionally outsider research was thought to be superior (Hellowell 2006), with Burgess (1984) considering that an outsider perspective allowed the researcher to be objective. Hellowell (2006:485) also underlines the traditional view against insider research in writing that '*the gravest academic sin they could commit was 'to go native'*', as critics would allege that to do so would '*pollute their objectivity*'. Social science research has now seen a re-evaluation of this standpoint with Labaree (2002:105) suggesting that nowadays most researchers

consider that *'either implicitly or explicitly, insiderness privileges the researcher'*. The literature is now full of examples of insider research with many researchers (Hellowell 2006; Labaree 2002) arguing strongly for the positive aspects of the insider perspective. Hellowell (2006) going so far as to suggest that some insider knowledge may never be accessible to outsiders. Labaree (2002) summarises four broad values of insiderness: the values of shared experiences; greater access; cultural interpretation; and of deeper understanding and clarity of thought for the researcher. He does, though, acknowledge that each of these advantages can be challenged.

Hellowell (2006:489) suggests that instead of viewing the insider-outsider perspective as a dichotomy, that there are *'subtly varying shades of 'insiderism' and outsiderism'* and that during the research process the researcher can simultaneously be both an insider and outsider on a multiple series of parallel continuums. This is apparent in my research, when I was interviewing CE ALs there was a considerable element of insiderness on a cultural experiences dimension, conversely, when I was interviewing ALs from a different faculty, there may have been an element of outsidership on a subject knowledge dimension. When interviewing CE students I empathised with the emotions that feedback can bring as I was also in a similar position with respect to being judged and receiving feedback, but I was an outsider in that I did not share their newness to an Anglo-Saxon educational system. Although I saw myself moving along several continuums depending on who I was collecting data from, I did not see myself as ever actually becoming an outsider.

My insiderness is a double-edged sword, I have experience of being both an AL and a student in CE and consequently share many of the experiences of my participants. This was an advantage in many respects but it may have made me myopic and unable

to make '*the familiar strange*' (Holliday 2003:13). I may have been too familiar with the perspective of a CE student, (and unfamiliar with that of the traditional UK OU student), and this may have led to me to disregard ordinary behaviour that is nevertheless meaningful. Another disadvantage of insider research is informant bias. I discussed my research informally with many potential AL interviewees and this may have caused them to tailor their responses to what they thought I wanted to hear, and made it difficult for me to ask obvious questions and '*simulate ignorance for research purposes*' (Powney and Watts 1987:186). I consequently had to be continually questioning my position in my research and the influence it may have had so that I could maintain enough distance to allow the analytical half of the insider/outsider partnership to function efficiently (Hockey 1993).

The concept of reflexivity, in which the researcher continuously reflects upon themselves, is vital to practitioner researchers (McIntosh and Webb 2007). Hertz (1997:vii) describes being reflexive as having an ongoing conversation about experience whilst at the same time '*living in the moment*'. Hertz maintains that we should not simply report on facts or truths, but should actively engage in the construction of interpretations of experiences, and question how those interpretations came about.

Reflexivity, accordingly needed to be a corner stone of this research, I constantly bore in mind my influence on the data. In quantitative research the influence of confounding variables is a serious matter and researchers are at pains to minimize any 'researcher effects' that might confound the data. In qualitative research, on the contrary, I, the researcher am the instrument of data collection, and so when analysing the data it was important that I took into consideration my own cultural assumptions

and the influence they may have had. I needed to be flexible, reflexive and at the same time manufacture distance between myself and my data (McCracken 1988). This was difficult, as my thinking could not help but be influenced by my prior knowledge of previous research, academic literature and my 'theories-in-use' (Argyris and Schön 1974).

Multiple research methods

When considering which methods to use I was immediately drawn to using an eclectic mixture of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Although the distinction between these methods exists on a number of levels, such as the production of knowledge, the research process and the level of epistemology, the distinction is most commonly applied at the level of methods, the process of data collection and the form in which the data are recorded and analysed (Brannen 1992). In the past it was traditional not to mix methods, Hammersley (1992) however, challenges this widely held view of the dichotomy of the two methodological paradigms, suggesting that it is unhelpful in that it represents a distillation of all that is good and bad in the methods. He suggests that rather than being dependent on philosophical or methodological commitments, a researchers' choice of methods should be based on the goals and circumstances of the research being pursued. Reassured by this I decided to use '*multiple research strategies*' (Burgess 1982). Burgess uses this term to describe the use of diverse methods in tackling a research problem, where researchers are flexible and select a range of methods that are appropriate to the research problem under investigation. Brannen (1992) uses a useful analogy when considering the difference between qualitative and quantitative methodology, where she suggests that the qualitative approach looks through a wide lens to search for patterns of inter-relationships between previously unspecified sets of concepts, whereas the

quantitative approach uses a narrow lens to look at a specified set of variables, and it was in this way I wished to use the two methodologies.

Brannen (1992:4) notes that '*the practice of research is a messy and untidy business which rarely conforms to the models set down in methodology text books*'. I therefore had to be attentive, I could not combine qualitative and quantitative methods and data without thought, I needed to consider that combining methods within a single piece of research raises the question of movement between paradigms at levels of epistemology and theory. Bryman (1992:xiv) distinguishes between genuine and false ways of combining quantitative and qualitative research and counsels that researchers should beware of the '*quantification of essentially qualitative material*', as this would be an example of a situation in which the type of data is a variance with the method used. I treated the data sets produced by each method as complementary to each another rather than trying to integrate them, or manipulate them in some way just so that they could be combined (Brannen, 1992). I did this by using what Gorard (2002:351) advocates is the most frequent method of combining qualitative and quantitative research findings, the '*new political arithmetic*' model. He suggests that this involves a two-stage research design, the first or descriptive stage involves a quantitative type investigation whereas the second or explanatory stage examines a sub-set of cases in more depth using qualitative techniques; therefore each type of data produced has a different purpose for which it may best be suited.

Case Study

Due to the parameters I had set for my research I decided to use case studies. The use of case studies is popular in social research, especially in small scale research projects (Denscombe 2007). Bassey (1999:1) sees an educational case study as:

an empirical enquiry within a localised boundary of space and time, into interesting aspects of a case, in its natural context, within an ethic of respect for persons, in order to inform the judgements and decisions of practitioners or policy-makers, or of theoreticians working to these ends.

A key feature of case studies are that they focus on one instance (or a few instances) of a particular phenomenon with a view to providing an in-depth account of events, relationships, experiences or processes occurring in that particular instance. Yin (1994) stresses that a case is a naturally occurring phenomenon, not artificially generated specifically for the research, that exists prior to the research and hopefully post-research; my cases (OU CE students and CE ALs) fit this description.

Case studies are not a method of collecting data but a research strategy (Burgess et al. 2006) that allows the use of a variety of sources, types of data and methods. As I was looking for an approach that allowed me to emphasize the depth of my study rather than the breadth, the particular rather than the general and the relationships and processes rather than outcomes and end products (Denscombe 2007), case studies appeared to be a suitable strategy. I anticipated that the focus on individual students and ALs rather than the OU as a whole would help me to gain insights that a large scale survey or structured interview would preclude. I also hoped that by using case studies I would be able to look in detail at relationships and processes, with the aim of shedding light on the complexities of situations and discovering how, and why, parts affect each other.

The advantage of using case studies is the potential to investigate, in-depth, the subtleties and intricacies of complex social situations but as this comes from the

strategic decision to restrict the range of the study, this is something that causes a potential problem. In the past, single case studies have tended to be looked down upon, being criticised for their lack of generalisability, the production of interesting findings, but unique to the circumstances of that case (Denscombe 2007). According to Denscombe this objection has now been considerably weakened. Establishing generalisations about the population which the case represents may not necessarily be the aim of the study. It is possible that while each case is in some respects unique, it is also a single example of a broader class of things – it is one of a type (Denscombe 2007). He suggest that the extent to which findings from the case study can be generalised to other examples in the class depends on how far the case study example is similar to others of its type. In order to establish the generalisability of my findings I will illustrate how the students who form my case study are similar to, and different from, other OU students. I also drew confidence from Beveridge's (1951) conclusion that the type of intense observation made possible by the case study has produced more discoveries than statistics applied to large groups.

Research Tools

(1) Questionnaires

As time constraints did not allow me to carry out in-depth interviews with all 61 students that I had taught in 2006-8, I felt a survey would provide me with some demographic data about the nationality, language skills, educational background, plus information about the use and experience of feedback, of a larger sample. I also used it to identify potential interviewees for the telephone interviews.

Burgess et al. (2006) suggest that if comparable and systematic data are needed from a large sample, then surveying is an appropriate method. As my participants were

spread throughout Europe, I needed an inexpensive method of collecting data from a widely dispersed sample and so chose an e-mailed questionnaire. A choice supported by Smith (1997) who maintains that self-administered survey questionnaires are an economic alternative to face-to-face and telephone interviews which are both costly and labour-intensive. Questionnaires though, are not without their disadvantages, Faulkner et al. (2001) suggest that they have several limitations: response rates may be low leading to a biased sample of responses; questions are open to differing interpretations as respondents cannot ask for explanations/clarifications and the preferred responses may not be allowed for in the questionnaire design. Questionnaires also assume that respondents are willing to divulge the information asked for.

I had to choose between e-mailing or posting my questionnaires. Smith (1997) lists the advantages of using e-mail as including low costs; quick turnaround time; facilitative interaction between survey authors and respondents; collapsed geographic boundaries; user-convenience, and more candid and extensive response quality. She does identify however, that little academic research has been reported about e-mail surveying despite its popularity. Smith (1997) further states that while literature from the 1990's illustrates anomalous findings with respect to response rate, today the gap between e-mail and traditional 'snail' mail techniques is considerably narrower, but she also adds a note of caution: *'one's target population must be technologically savvy enough to use it'*. As my target population make extensive use of 'FirstClass' (the OU's e-mail and conferencing system), e-TMAs, etc., I felt that they were technologically competent and so chose to e-mail the questionnaire.

(2) Semi-Structured Telephone Interviews

I decided that semi-structured interviews would be the best tool to directly elicit the voice of my participants and provide data within which I could ground my theory. I expected the interviews to produce more in-depth material than the questionnaire, as issues could be probed and explored as they arose. In choosing semi-structured interviews I was aware that there might be some loss of flexibility and that fixed question wording might reduce the richness of the data collected (Langdrige 2004). I considered that this disadvantage was outweighed by the fact that the responses could be compared and analysed more easily, and also that this type of interview ensured that all topics were covered, but respondents were not constrained by fixed answers.

Research literature provides a good deal of general information on how to conduct interviews (Morse 1991; McCracken 1988) but Sorrel and Redmond (1995) suggest that there is less detailed guidance for the researcher in tailoring the interview format to a specific type of qualitative methodology. After considering different types of interviewing, I settled on ethnographic interviewing, which grew out of anthropological/sociological traditions and is aimed at describing the cultural knowledge of the informant, i.e. the cultural knowledge which students use in carrying out various writing assignments for their courses. Sorrel and Redmond (1995:1119) propose that the ethnographic interview is a '*series of friendly conversations*' with a clear and specific research agenda. The interviewer uses an informal approach to explore categories of meanings in a culture, in my case the culture of OU CE students. The interviewer is interested in what people think and how one person's perspective compares with another's, as this comparison will help the interviewer to identify shared values among members of a cultural group.

The Europe-wide distribution of participants mitigated against face-to-face interviews, so I chose telephone interviewing. There is a good deal of literature discussing the problems and pitfalls of face-to-face interviewing and I was concerned whether telephone interviewing presented any special, additional problems. For a long time it was believed that the best way to conduct interviews was face-to-face and that telephone interviewing was more suitable for mass surveying, and political and market polling (Rogers 1976). There has however, been a shift in this thinking and nowadays the telephone is used more frequently both for surveys and for semi- and unstructured interviews, with Wishart (2003) concluding that data could be successfully combined from telephone interviews and mailed surveys. Positive points that she commented on were that telephone interviewing did not inhibit interviewees from providing additional information and that the interviewers were able to check that their interpretation was correct and elicit further information if required.

Taylor (2002:19) reports that telephone interviews are not seen as a serious research tool by many qualitative researchers working within an interpretivist paradigm. She herself works within this paradigm but does not totally agree with this viewpoint, believing that *'there appears to be some circumstances in which the telephone is a highly appropriate tool for eliciting qualitative data that provide thick description.'* Other researchers are in agreement, and data collection using telephone interviews is now being used more frequently in educational research (see Dicker and Gilbert 1988; Miller 1995).

With respect to the quality of data obtained, Groves and Kahn (1979) report that data from telephone interviews were better than that obtained from mailed questionnaires, being more on a par with that from face-to-face interviews. Rogers (1976) looked at

the quality of responses to telephone and face-to-face interviews and concludes that the quality of data obtained is of a similar standard both with respect to completeness and accuracy, and that interviewees are willing to answer both complex and personal/sensitive questions. A conclusion also supported by Sykes and Hoinville (1985) who analysed data obtained by face-to-face and telephone interviewing and concluded that there were few significant differences in data obtained by the two methods. Some minor differences between the two methods were found by Groves and Kahn (1979), in that telephone interviews tended to proceed more quickly than face-to-face interviews and were more likely to finish earlier, but apart from this they found few substantive difference between the two methods.

A criticism leveled at telephone interviewing is that it may produce less detailed information, but Sykes and Collins (1988) suggest that this can be overcome by ensuring that interviewees understand what is required of them. I was concerned that the lack of non-verbal cues might have an effect on the information gained, but Miller (1995) maintains that this is not an issue. In face-to-face interviewing the interviewee is often encouraged to continue their narrative by visual clues such as nods, smiles and other non-verbal gestures. This lack of visual clues in telephone interviewing means encouragement needs to be provided through the use of paralinguistic utterances ('yes', 'aha', 'Mmmm'), but this needs to be done without influencing the responses of the interviewee (Dicker and Gilbert 1988). They have also highlighted 'over speaking' as a problem to be aware of.

Evaluation

The qualitative researcher, unlike the quantitative researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest, rather observing '*phenomenon of interest*

[that] *unfold naturally*' (Patton 2002:39). Whereas quantitative researchers look for causal determination, prediction and the generalization of findings, qualitative researchers look for illumination, understanding and extrapolation to similar situations (Hoepfl 1997). Methods of evaluating quantitative research are well established and widely used. The reliability and validity of observations and conclusions can be tested in a number of ways and well respected statistical procedures have been developed to test these issues and to support claims of generalisability.

Denzin and Lincoln (1998) argue that the traditional positivist criteria for evaluating quantitative research i.e. validity, reliability and generalisability may no longer applicable to postmodern and poststructuralist qualitative studies where the author's voice instead of being hidden is acknowledged as being important, and where 'truth' is not the end point of research. For many social scientists the concept of an 'unadulterated truth' is untenable (Silverman 1993) and it is now commonly acknowledged that texts are socially constructed.

Trochim (2006) suggests that as some qualitative researchers reject the basic realist assumption that there is a reality external to our perception of it, it is not logical to be concerned with the validity or 'truth' or 'falsity' of an observation. He outlines the different standards that these qualitative researchers propose should be used for judging the quality of qualitative research. Guba and Lincoln (1989), for example, proposed four alternative criteria for judging qualitative research, suggesting that the criteria of: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, better reflect the underlying assumptions involved in qualitative research. The credibility criteria is concerned with ascertaining that the results of the research are credible or

believable from the perspective of the participants involved in the research. The extent to which the findings of the research can be generalised or transferred to other contexts or settings is termed the 'transferability'. Trochim (2006) maintains that *'transferability is primarily the responsibility of the one doing the generalizing'* and that the researcher can increase transferability by clearly describing the research context and the central assumptions of the research. It is acknowledged in qualitative research that reliability, in the sense of replicability, is impossible, so an alternative criteria of dependability has been proposed. Dependability, puts the onus on the researcher to acknowledge the continually changing context within which research occurs and how these changes may have affected the way they approached the study (Trochim 2006). The final criteria is confirmability, although qualitative research is based on the assumption that each researcher brings their own unique perspective to the investigation, confirmability concerns the degree to which the results could be confirmed or corroborated by others. In the following chapter I will outline some of the strategies I used to enhance confirmability, for example the use of intra-transcriber checking during transcription and how I looked for negative instances that might contradict observations. I hope I have left a thorough *'audit trail'* (Lincoln and Guba 1985:319) that will enable my readers to assess how credible, transferable, dependable and confirmable my findings are.

With the hindsight of having completed my investigation, I wish to make some critical reflections on the sample used in this study. Neither the survey nor interview sample were random, the following Chapter (pp70-73) explains the rationale for this. This decision however, has implications on the transferability of the findings, as discussed above. For example although I ensured as much as possible that the characteristics of the interview sample of ex-students were reflective of my tutor

groups, there were certain variables that I gave a low priority to. For instance, the gender split in my tutor groups is usually unbalanced with each group having a higher proportion of females (approximately 1:5, in favour of females) and this ratio was not present in the interview data, as fewer females volunteered to be interviewed. Although I tried to balance my sample with respect to interviewees being continuing or new OU students, there were other factors that I might have considered such as age or nationality, but I felt that trying to divide the potential interview sample into too many strata was not feasible given the sample number. Regan (1998) maintains that there is no such thing as a 'typical' CE tutor group and so it also cannot be assumed that the age/gender/nationality proportions present in my tutor groups were reflective of CE tutor groups as whole. In fact the country co-ordinator for Italy was of the opinion that there is considerable variability on these factors depending on the faculty or even course observed (Pollard, Country Coordinator – personal communication). As a consequence I am aware that there are a number of additional variables which may also have been influential on the data collected.

Biases may also have been present in the AL interview data. The small sample of CE ALs interviewed puts restrictions on the conclusions that can be drawn, nevertheless this should not detract from one of the aims of the investigation, which was to give CE ALs a 'voice'. A key factor though, that needs to be borne in mind is that these ALs have all only tutored for the OU whilst living in CE, something which may have coloured their perceptions. In particular they may have been drawing comparative conclusions based on what they believe the stereotypic UK OU student to be like.

The demographic data outlined in Chapter 5 and Appendices 12 and 13 illustrate some key demographic details of the students surveyed and interviewed. The

students in these samples were not ‘typical’ OU students and as a consequence the views expressed by the tutor’s of CE groups may be subjected to bias and stereotyping. Not having experienced tutoring in the UK may have caused the ALs to have mistakenly drawn conclusions based on judgments of nationality or culture, when in fact other variables such as gender, age or faculty may have been responsible for what were interpreted as cultural differences. For example, the Humanities tutor in Italy commented on differences between the Italian and Greek students in his tutor group, remarking that his Greek students were more voluble and engaged in discussion than the Italians, it is possible though, that there may have been a gender reason for this (males predominated in the ‘Greek’ group) or the Greek students may appreciated the effort the tutor had made to travel to Greece, whereas the Italian students may have presumed that the tutorial was just another routine work assignment for the tutor. A further factor may have been the ‘novelty’ aspect for this tutor, he had been tutoring groups of students mostly resident in Italy for several years and had only recently been allocated students based in Greece.

As with all the findings from this study, the findings from the AL interviews are a ‘snapshot’ of the experiences of a particular group of ALs at a particular point in their tutoring career. Whilst these ALs are not necessarily representative of all CE ALs their experiences and opinions may illustrate some communalities that all CE ALs experience. The findings outlined and discussed in Chapters 5 & 6 therefore reflect the tutoring experiences of a small group of ALs, each AL will have brought to their tutoring their own cultural and educational experiences and values, and these along with the myriad of diversities that are to be found among their students, means that the reader needs to view the following chapters as an illustration of some aspects of the wide spectrum of the phenomenon being investigated.

Although, as outlined previously there is the potential for bias and stereotyping within the findings, one of the aims of this research was to explore the relationships and processes within tutoring in CE, with the aim of shedding light on the complexity of the situation and aiding the discovery of how different aspects affect each other and the reader is urged to consider the following chapters in this light.

Conclusion

This chapter explained my choice of research methodology and considered several important matters such as the researcher's voice and reflexivity, multiple research strategies and data collection methods. In thinking about my research questions (p.17) and the diverse data I intended to collect it became apparent that Gorard's (2002) '*new political arithmetic*' model (p.56) was an appropriate method for combining my qualitative and quantitative data. The following chapter will look more closely at how this study was actually carried out and how the findings were analysed.

Chapter 4 – Data Gathering

In the previous chapter I considered various theoretical aspects of the methodological approaches used in this research. In this chapter I consider ethical issues, look more closely at the two different research methods I employed, and how I collected and analysed my data. As this study was of interest to R09, the country co-ordinator in Italy proposed an extension of the survey to the Assistant Regional Director, who agreed to fund a survey covering a wider population of CE students. In February 2008 the OU's Institute of Educational Technology (IET) sent out an adapted (electronic) form of the questionnaire. Unfortunately a poor response rate and other methodological issues (see pp.68-9) constrained the use of data from this survey.

Ethical issues

The American Psychological Association's ethical principles (APA 2002) state that research with human participants must serve scientific and human interests. Kvale (1996:109) also comments that '*An interview inquiry is a moral enterprise*'. In line with this, and the British Psychological Association (BPA 2006) and British Education Research Association (BERA 2004) ethical guidelines, I obtained informed consent from my interviewees, informing them about the purpose of my research, the main design features and any possible risks or benefits from participating. I also ensured that my interviewees were participating voluntarily; that they knew that they could refuse to answer any question; withdraw from the interview at any time and if they wished to, request their data to be destroyed. I also ensured participant confidentiality by using pseudonyms and not reporting any data that could lead to their identification. This was a relatively easy task for students but as there were so few ALs in each country, I had to be more circumspect with their data.

I confined myself to interviewing students whom I did not currently tutor as I believed it would not be ethically or methodologically correct to interview current students. As their tutor and person who assesses their work, I hold a position of power over my current students and so it would be unethical to ask them about their experience of feedback from this position. It would also have been incorrect methodologically, due to the influence of demand characteristics interviewees might have said what they thought I wanted them to say, rather than what they truly did/felt. The influence of the power differential between myself and ex-students was also problematical, although I am their ex-tutor I still have 'power' within the OU hierarchy. To go some way to mitigating this I worded my questions so as to be non-judgemental i.e. not asking what was good/bad about their experience of my tutoring but rather asking for strengths/weaknesses; aspects that could be expanded upon or omitted, etc. It is often difficult to avoid demand characteristics and at the same time obtain fully informed consent, but I felt that there was no reason to deceive the interviewees about the research topic.

Prior to sending out the questionnaire and carrying out any student interviews I contacted the 'Student Research Project Panel', a body that approves all research at the OU involving students. This panel ensures that participants are not overwhelmed with requests to participate in OU research; that all research is of an ethical nature and that all data protection requirements are adhered to. I submitted an application and all supporting questionnaires and interview schedules to the panel and approval was granted in August 2006, with the proviso that I did not carry out any interviews until November 2006, (after students had finished their examinations).

Survey Samples

Ex-student survey

As one of the underlying aims of this research was to improve my practice as an AL, I wished to make the focus of my sample my ex-students, but I also wanted to embed the views of 'my' students within a more general picture of the experiences of CE students in order to enhance the transferability and confirmability of my findings. Both previous research (Tavola 1994), and my own personal experience, have indicated that OU students are a very mobile population and as I wished to get a high response rate from my sample I chose to sample all the students I had tutored in the years 2006-2008. The rationale for this range was that if these students studied a level 2 course in 2006-8 then they should still be OU students and so contactable through the OU's FirstClass e-mail system. I also reasoned that if they were continuing OU students they would still be receiving feedback and so should have useful contributions to make to the research. I consequently e-mailed the survey to all the OU students I tutored in this period. In total 61 students received the questionnaire and 52 (85%) returned completed questionnaires.

IET Survey

Interest in my research at regional level led to the assistant Regional Director agreeing to fund a survey covering a wider population of CE students. In February 2008 IET sent out an adapted (electronic) form of the questionnaire to 118 students, of whom 28 (24%) responded. IET used the following criteria to select the sample: primarily students living in Western Europe who had studied DSE212 or ED209 (the two courses I tutor) in the academic year 2006/07 were selected. Any ex-students of mine were supposed to be removed, although I later discovered that this had not occurred. Any students who had requested 'no contact' or had already been sampled

within the last month, plus any students who were retaking DSE212 or ED209 and currently 'live' on the course, were also removed.

The disappointingly low return rate for this survey possibly reflected my lack of personal contact with the respondents and/or the fact that they may have been asked for similar information on other occasions. As part of its quality control process the OU uses an online surveying process, DALs (Developing Associate Lecturers through Student feedback), which involves sending selected students, towards the end of a course, an electronic feedback questionnaire consisting of 18 core questions (common to all ALs), and up to 20 further questions selected by the AL from a bank of questions, depending on the questions chosen by individual ALs, there may have been considerable overlap with my questionnaire.

As there were such disparate return rates for the two surveys I elected not to combine the quantitative data from my ex-students sample with the IET sample. I considered that the high response rate from my sample would reflect a more representative set of views whereas the low response rate of the IET sample might reflect the contrary. The low response rate may have meant that the perceptions gathered were not necessarily representative of the entire CE student population — those who responded may have been more motivated to give their views than their fellow students because they felt strongly positive, or strongly critical of the feedback they had received. I did though, analyse some of the quantitative data from the IET survey and compare it with the analysis of my student sample, this analysis can be found in appendix 13. I also discovered that IET had sent the survey to some of my ex-students. As the respondents to the IET survey could remain anonymous, I could not be certain where the overlap occurred and decided that this was a further factor

mitigating against combining the two sets of data. These concerns did not apply to the qualitative data and so I included in the thematic analysis, where appropriate, qualitative replies to the open questions on the IET survey. The main use of the IET survey consequently, was to collate the names and contact details of students willing to be interviewed by telephone.

Telephone interview samples

With respect to the telephone interviews with my ex-students I used 'purposeful stratified sampling' (Patton 2002). To obtain this sample I placed all 35 students who volunteered to be interviewed, (67% of all respondents), into a number of groups or strata, where members of the group had some characteristic in common i.e. NESs living in Italy; NNESs living in Italy; Native Italian speakers living in Italy, etc. I then intended to select a random sample from each strata, but as the numbers within some strata were very small I sampled the whole strata. A total of 12 students were interviewed (6 NESs and 6 NNESs). A breakdown of the demographic characteristics of those interviewed can be found in Appendix 1.

As I wished to extend the range of my sample I also solicited volunteers willing to be interviewed via the IET survey. 15 (54%) of the respondents to the IET survey indicated that they would be willing to participate in telephone interviews. I e-mailed all of them inviting them to suggest a suitable time for the interview, seven declined to be interviewed or did not have fixed phone lines, and so a total of eight students were actually interviewed (two NESs and six NNESs), (see Appendix 1 for demographic details).

The AL sample was not a random sample but an opportunity one. I contacted all four Italy based ALs and three agreed to be interviewed. From them, plus the country co-ordinator I obtained further contacts. In total I approached five more ALs, all of whom agreed to be interviewed but only three were available at a suitable time via a landline. I therefore interviewed a total of 6 CE based ALs, (3 based in Italy, and one each based in Austria, Switzerland and France). All had worked for the OU for some time (8-16 years). Two were based in the arts faculty and tutored an undergraduate foundation course, another two tutored a social science foundation course, one tutored a second level education course and one a postgraduate course for the OU Business school (OUBS). The level one tutors tended to have smaller groups (10-12 students) than the other tutors, who had approximately 20 students per group. Only the OUBS tutor had a group consisting mostly of nationals from the country where she was resident. All the other tutors had groups that were comprised of many different nationals. The composition of the groups tended to remain fairly stable for the OUBS tutor but varied year by year for the other tutors. With respect to students' previous educational experience the OUBS tutor found a more uniform level, as all her students had to be graduates in order to take the course. The other tutors all had some graduates in their groups (see Appendix 2 for summary of demographic details).

Research tools

Survey questionnaire

In devising my survey questionnaire I followed guidelines by Faulkner et al. (2001) and Youngman (1978). Previous studies by ALs (McDonnell et al. 2004) reported low return rates for questionnaires requesting feedback, McDonnell (2005:3) commenting that OU students often lack the time and effort needed for providing

considered feedback. The questionnaire consequently needed to minimise the time and effort required for completion, whilst providing the information required. Ownership of the questionnaire is one of the factors most likely to influence response rate, with participants needing to be aware of where the questionnaire has come from and why, and by whom the survey is being undertaken (Moser and Kalton 1971). If the topic of the questionnaire is seen to be of relevance to respondents' lives, or if they feel that by completing it they can influence decisions relevant to them, they are more likely to complete it. I relied partly on the relationship I had developed with my students and partly on their motivation to see feedback practices within the OU improve to prompt a high response rate. My covering message, (see Appendix 3), made the themes of the questionnaire explicit so that respondents were in the right 'cognitive mind set' to complete it.

As I was asking students to comment on my practice i.e. my feedback, I was careful not to word questions in a way that was gratifying for me, (i.e. the collection of positive feedback on my tutoring), but did not address my research questions. Bird et al. (1996) caution that attention should be paid to questionnaire length and the time it may take to complete. Piloting of the questionnaire on a small sample of ex-OU students revealed some overlap in the questions and the number was reduced from 42 to 34: 31 closed questions, which were easier and quicker to code (Munn and Drever 2004) and 3 open-ended questions, (see Appendix 4 for final questionnaire). The simpler, factual questions were presented first followed by more complex or open-ended questions, arranged so that questions covering similar issues were grouped together. The language and terminology were chosen carefully to ensure that the wording was clear, concise and unambiguous and that biased and leading questions were avoided. All respondents were thanked for their contribution.

Piloting the questionnaire also revealed that more conformity was required in the response choices. Originally a variety of possible responses were used: yes/no; yes totally/yes mostly/some/a few/none; Always/Sometimes/Never. I therefore re-worded some questions so that a 5-point Likert response scale could be used. Although a Likert scale may be subject to distortion, i.e. the avoidance of extreme categories (central tendency bias) or agreeing with responses (acquiescence bias) or social desirability bias, I felt that this was the best way to collect responses.

Three weeks after the course examination in October 2007 and 2008 I e-mailed the questionnaire to my students, 41 in 2007 and 20 in 2008 (the difference in number being due to the fact that many of the 2008 cohort completed the survey in 2007, as I often tutor students for 2 consecutive years). I attached a covering message explaining the research and its potential outcomes, hoping this would establish respondents' goodwill towards the research and hence willingness to participate. Ethical matters were covered, I reassured respondents that their participation was optional, responses would be confidential and that they need not answer any question they felt uncomfortable with (see Appendix 3). A deadline of three weeks was given for the return of the questionnaire and 80% (49) were returned, reminders were sent out to non-returners, which prompted the return of another three. Of the nine (15%) who did not return questionnaires there was almost an equal split between NESs and NNESs. There were very similar return rates in 2007 and 2008 (86% and 85% respectively).

Telephone Interviews

After considering my research questions, the literature reviewed and previous research in the area, I developed two interview schedules, one for ALs and one for students

(Appendices 5 & 6). The questionnaire had invited students to indicate whether or not they were willing to be interviewed and from those of my ex-students (surveyed in 2007) who volunteered, I selected a stratified purposeful sample (p.70) whom I e-mailed suggesting a suitable time for the interview. The interviews took place between November 2007 and May 2008. From the IET sample I interviewed all willing students who had a landline, these interviews took place between March and June 2008. Prior to the interviews I e-mailed each of the participants an outline of the topics to be discussed. I also covered ethical matters i.e. requesting permission to record interviews, (stressing that the recording would be erased after transcription), assuring confidentiality and mentioning that they could withdraw at anytime. I also gave realistic expectations of the time involved (see Appendices 7 and 8).

Each interview began with some general conversation to establish rapport and reiterate ethical matters. As the interviews took place a few weeks after the final course examination several of my ex-students wanted to discuss their examination performance and had to be gently led back to focus on the topic of the interview. I then worked through the interview schedule. Where appropriate I asked the interviewee to elaborate their answers or give specific examples using a list of prepared probes (see Appendices 5 and 6), based on key themes of the questionnaire. During interviews I tried to maximize cue questions (Ball 1991) in order to elicit responses to key themes, whilst also allowing the interviewees to say what they wanted to say and avoiding leading to an answer. I tried to ensure that each interview covered similar ground so as to make the analysis easier.

I used 'Skype' (a voice over IP system) for the telephone interviews. This was to reduce costs, as many of the interviews were across international borders and so that

the interviews could be recorded as mp3 audio files, facilitating transcription. I experienced some technical problems with Skype (dropped calls and echoing on the line). NESs seemed to cope better with these problems than NNEs, where quite a lot of question repetition and re-framing were needed, which led to frustration on the part of some NNEs. Student interviews lasted between 35 and 75 minutes and AL interviews between 65 and 90 minutes. Those with my ex-students tended to last longer, as these students often wished to talk about other OU related matters, (next courses, degree recognition, etc), after the formal interview had ended. Two interviews were temporarily interrupted because of child care issues.

The AL interviews took place over longer period (December 2006 – November 2007) as there were no restrictions on when they could take place. The three ALs based in Italy are close colleagues and occasionally the interviews with these ALs felt a little stilted as both they and I knew we had discussed several of the issues covered in the interview schedule previously, and I was familiar with their opinion. This did not occur with the other three ALs, whom I knew from staff development events but were not close colleagues.

Transcription

The oral data obtained from the telephone interviews needed to be transcribed into a written format that could be thematically analysed. The transformation from oral to written discourse involves a series of judgements and decisions, as illustrated by Bourdieu (1996:30), who claims that *'even the most literal form of writing up (the simplest punctuation, such as the placing of a comma, can dictate the whole sense of a phrase) represents a translation or even an interpretation'*. These judgements are important as once interviews are transcribed, the transcripts and not the recordings,

tend to be regarded as the '*solid empirical data*' of the research (Kvale 1996:163). Obviously this is wrong as the transcriptions are not the data that is collected but an artificial transformation of that data from an oral form to a written format and so they are constructed and not raw data, they are both '*interpretive and constructive*' (Lapadat and Lindsay 1999:72) .

The mp3 files containing the telephone interviews were transcribed using 'Dragon Naturally Speaking' voice recognition software (Nuance Communications Inc). I simultaneously listened to the voice recording of the interview while dictating the transcript into a word file, using two PCs. One on which I replayed the recorded interviews, and the other to word-process the transcript. Two PCs were required as I needed constant access to the control panel for playing and re-replaying to the audio file and this 'window' could not remain open at the same time as the word-processing screen (see Appendix 9 for example transcript).

Although training the voice recognition software took sometime, the time saving benefits were enormous as listening and dictation could be done almost simultaneously. As might be expected I was able to simultaneously listen and dictate longer sections when I was the interlocutor. I was also able to listen to, and dictate sections consisting of 1-2 lines when the interviewee was a NES. With NNEs interviewees the amount of simultaneous dictation decreased, sometimes to just a word or a phrase. After the initial transcription I re-read the transcripts whilst simultaneously listening to the sound files several times to check for accuracy.

Kvale (1996) suggests that the construction of the transcript raises issues of reliability and validity. When there is more than one transcriber, inter-transcriber reliability can

be calculated. As I was transcribing alone, I did an intra-transcriber check by transcribing the same sections on two different occasions (Field and Morse 1985). Errors that I checked for were 'interpolations', (the insertion of missing words or grammar), which according to Mischler (1991) is a common unconscious practice in transcription. In many ways the transcription of the NNEs' interviews was much more difficult than the NESs'. While NNEs tend to speak slower they often made grammatical errors that led me to make more interpolations in the transcripts. The most difficult interview to transcribe was actually that of the Ghanaian student, whose mother tongue is English. This may fit with the comments of Brown (1995) with respect to world Englishes (p.37), as this student was from an outer Circle country. I found both the cadences and syntax of his English difficult to follow, as they were quite different from my own.

The benefits of self-transcription have been noted (Langridge 2004; Braun and Carke 2006). The necessity of the researcher listening to every detail many times in order to get an accurate written record, aids recall and helps make meaning from the data. Transcription is not simply the mechanical act of making marks on paper to represent spoken sounds (Lapadat and Lindsay 1999), it is also a vital aspect of data analysis as at this initial stage of analysis memos can be written as ideas come to mind during the transcription, which may later stimulate and inform analysis and theory development (Langridge 2004). Although the transcription was time consuming, frustrating and at times boring, the repeated listenings did reveal '*previously unnoted recurring features*' (Silverman 1993:117), which I recorded with the use of footnotes.

Kvale (1996) suggests that transcription involves the transcriber in a series of technical and interpretational issues in which a series of choices have to be made, these choices being largely personal due to the paucity of standard codes or rules for transcribing research interviews. Within discourse and conversational analysis (CA) there are various conventions, such as the 'Jefferson' system for CA (Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998), that guide the transformation of spoken texts into written texts. Wellard and McKenna (2001) state that within thematic analysis discussion of transcription techniques and practical, theoretically grounded help in the literature is rare, reporting that many papers and texts refer to transcription as part of the sequence of moving from interview to analysis but neglect to offer advice on how this is done.

During transcription I had to make several decisions: should the interview be transcribed verbatim, including repetitions, 'ers' and 'umms', etc., or should it be transformed into a more formal written style; should pauses, silences, emphases in intonation and emotional expressions such as laughter be included. Should everything be transcribed verbatim or should I condense and summarise parts that had little relevance to the research.

Bearing in mind Kvale's (1996:166) counsel that I should consider '*What is a useful transcription for my research purposes*' and Langridge's (2004) opinion that a verbatim record focusing on the content of what was said is adequate for ethnography, phenomenological analysis or grounded theory. I decided that as I was not doing a linguistic analysis such as discourse or CA, a verbatim description was not necessary. Neither was I conducting a psychological interpretation, so pauses, repetitions and tone of voice were also not necessary. I also felt that it was generally

not necessary to note paralinguistic features (non-phonemic aspects of language i.e. the manner in which a word is said – jokey/seriously).

The use of punctuation needed some thought, as its insertion can alter the meaning of data, for example '*I hate it, you know. I do*' versus '*I hate it. You know I do*' (Poland 2002 as cited in Braun and Clarke 2006:88). I therefore tried to keep punctuation to a minimum so as not to distort the meaning of the data.

Data Analysis

Survey

Chapter Five begins with a quantitative analysis of the data from the closed questions of the questionnaire. I collated the data on a simple Excel spreadsheet; calculated the percentages for each response, making sure that these were proportions of those who answered the question and produced graphical illustrations where appropriate. For several questions comparisons were made between the responses of NESs and NNEs and these were illustrated by means of histograms (see pp.89-94 Figures 5.1–5.5 and appendix 12).

With respect to the open questions, to make the qualitative data more manageable I collated the data by categorising responses in a word-file, I then thematically analysed them alongside the interview data.

Thematic Analysis

In order to analyse my qualitative data I needed a method for identifying, analysing and reporting themes or patterns within the data. There are several methods that can

be used to describe patterns across qualitative data, for example 'thematic' discourse analysis, thematic decomposition analysis, IPA (interpretative phenomenological analysis) or grounded theory. In particular I was drawn towards Braun and Clarke's (2006:81) observation that *'thematic analysis can be a method that works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of 'reality'*. They do caution however, that researchers should make the theoretical position of a thematic analysis clear and not leave it 'unspoken' as is common in this type of research.

Braun and Clarke (2006:77) argue that while thematic analysis is a useful and flexible method to use in qualitative research it is *'poorly demarcated, rarely acknowledged, yet widely used'*. In their paper they outline the positive aspects of using this method of analysis, suggesting that particularly for the novice analysing qualitative data it is both a theoretically flexible and accessible approach. They also suggest that due to its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis can also provide the researcher with a research tool that is useful, flexible and has the potential to provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data. Historically, Braun and Clarke suggest that thematic analysis has suffered from a lack of clear agreement about what it is, and how it is carried out, and that in lacking concise guidelines it has laid itself open to the 'anything goes' critique of qualitative research. Braun and Clarke have tried to rectify this by providing extensive, but flexible guidelines, which I have used in carrying out my thematic analysis. In this chapter I will answer Attride-Stirling's (2001) criticism that qualitative researchers often omit the 'how', of how the analysis was carried out and by making it clear how I undertook my analysis.

I carried out the thematic analysis following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and the three levels of coding proposed by Langridge (2004). The transcription, proof reading and checking of the transcripts ensured that I followed

their first stage, which was immersing and familiarizing myself with my data. Throughout the transcription phase I compiled ‘memos’ by inserting footnotes and noting down initial ideas. The second stage involved generating initial (descriptive) codes. Here I systematically went through each transcript and coded, (in the right hand margin), each ‘chunk’ of data that I felt was interesting and relevant to the investigation. This ‘chunk’ might have been a word, phrase or several sentences. Figure 4.1 gives an example of the codes applied to a short segment of data. Prompted by my research questions, literature search and familiarization with the transcripts, I began the coding with some idea of what my initial codes might be. In coding the data I found that on some occasions I already had an initial code that matched with the data extract, but on other occasions it was the data extract itself that generated the code. Appendix 9 contains a fully coded transcript and Appendix 10 a list of the codes used.

<i>Iskra: Well, first, I went and checked my mark. Well I guess I get my mark immediately after I get into ‘the collect your TMA’, the first thing you see is the mark. Next thing I go to PT3 form and read the feedback and next thing, then I go to the TMA and I read the TMA remarks, I enjoyed this one a lot, the marked TMA. Then there are things that sometimes you will say for higher marks you should have done this and that, sometimes I even have no idea, what, how could I have done, how could I have done better than that and what exactly that means,</i>	<i>FB.ord</i> <i>FB.frust</i> <i>FB.neg.nohow</i>
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- Key**
- FB.ord = the order in which the feedback is read
 - FB.frust = frustration student experiences with feedback
 - FB.neg.nohow = negative aspects of feedback – no indication of how to improve

Figure 4.1 Example of codes applied to data extract

Second order coding occurred after I had coded each transcript, I collated together all the data extracts relevant to each code using the cut and paste function of the computer. Often data extracts received several different codes (as in Figure 4.1) and

so appeared in several collations. Braun and Clarke (2006) are at pains to point out that data sets are not without contradiction, and counsel that the eventual thematic ‘map’ should not remove or ignore any inconsistencies within, and across the data. I accordingly made sure that I did not ignore data items that departed from, or were contradictory to the ‘dominant story’ in the analysis. Following Langridge’s (2004) suggestions, in my second level coding I went beyond data description and I began some interpretation. This involved looking at my first order descriptive codes and generating higher order codes (labels) that captured the meaning of larger segments of data. These superordinate constructs should be more generic than the first-order descriptive codes (Langridge 2004), and as a consequence of the data being sorted into broader categories I was able to reduce the number of codes used. Figure 4.2 is an example of a second order coding generated from several first order codes:

2 nd order code: Usefulness of exemplar assignments (EXu)	
EXca	Shows there is no single correct answer
EXconf	Comparison boosts confidence in own work
EXdac	illustrates differences in academic traditions
EXeng	Helps improve English
EXexp	illustrates expectations
EXlang	Helps improve academic writing style
EXpos.gen	Positive general
EXstr	Illustrates required structure
EXsty	Useful to see someone else’s style

Figure 4.2: Example of second order code

The third phase of the thematic analysis occurred after the second order coding was complete and involved searching for themes. Here, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) I went through my collated codes provisionally sorting them into potential themes. I spent considerable time working on ‘thematic maps’ (see

appendix 11) trying to find a good way to illustrate the relationship between my codes and themes, and between different levels of themes.

Phase four involved reviewing the themes: I checked to make sure that the themes worked in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, so generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis. The fifth phase refined, defined and named the themes. The final phase was the selection of illustrative quotes that allowed me to connect my analysis to the research question and literature, and can be seen in the following chapter.

Quotations

After having established my themes I needed to communicate my findings to my reader. As is standard practice in much qualitative research I chose to include verbatim quotations from participants in reporting my findings. According to Corden and Sainsbury (2006) the use of quotations from transcripts can aid both the clarification of links between data, interpretation and conclusions and be useful in illustrating the reliability, validity, credibility and auditability of the research.

Verbatim quotations may be used among other things *‘as evidence; as explanation; as illustration; to deepen understanding; to give participants a voice, and to enhance readability’* (Corden and Sainsbury 2006:11). I have used extensive verbatim quotations to report my findings in Chapter Five for several of these reasons, and because I wished to give CE OU students and ALs a ‘voice’. It was my opinion that direct quotations would aid communication and make the chapter more ‘readable’, by providing some ‘colour’, and making the interviewees come alive for the reader. I also used quotations with the aim that, in seeing some of the original data, readers

would be able to judge the fairness and accuracy of my analysis. I also wished to establish an 'audit trail', to strengthen the credibility of my research. I am aware however that my readers could give more importance to those themes illustrated with a quotation or consider that points not illustrated by quotations were of lesser importance (Corden and Sainsbury 2006).

In editing the transcript material included as quotations I had to make several decisions. I needed to balance the need for conciseness and readability against distorting the data. I have not corrected the grammar of my interviewees but I have removed some speech artefacts such as 'um', 'like', 'you know' and other repetitions to aid ease of reading. Within quotations I have followed conventional transcribing practices (Corden and Sainsbury 2006) and used ellipsis (...) to indicate that that I have edited the transcript by taking out words or phrases and the repetitions and false starts referred to above.

Conclusion

This chapter has explained how I developed my data collection instruments, how I collected the data and finally how I analyzed it. Reflecting on the research process, there are several aspects that with hindsight I would have changed. For example, I carried out the student interviews after having designed and sent out the survey questionnaire. The analysis of the interview data revealed other areas that it would have been profitable to probe in the survey, such as differences between the OU's Anglo-Saxon style and the students' home teaching and assessment experience, and whether or not the student had experienced intellectual self-censorship. I would also have re-worded some of the survey questions, as some of them elicited positive comments but no suggestions on how students felt feedback could have been

meliorated. In the chapter that follows I take forward my data analysis and present findings from both the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data.

Chapter 5 – Data Analysis

In this chapter I describe findings from the student survey and student and AL interviews. The data from the survey not only indicated the wide variety of cultural backgrounds the students came from but also revealed some similarities in this disparate cohort of students. The data also showed that many of these students were ‘anglophiles’, who came to their studies with quite a considerable background knowledge of English and Anglo-Saxon educational methods.

In this chapter I have used extensive verbatim quotations hoping that they would fulfil the points raised (p.83) By Corden and Sainsbury (2006), and provide some ‘colour’, by making the interviewees come alive for the reader. After each quotation I have provided the author with a pseudonym; indicated their nationality; whether or not they are a graduate, and if the material comes from the survey or from the telephone interviews (TI). In reporting quotations from ALs I have indicated their faculty and country of residence. Appendices 2 and 3 contain background information on each interviewee.

Analysis of survey data

My first research questions asks ‘*How do CE students learn from their TMA feedback?*’, CE students are not a homogeneous group and in order for the reader to have a picture of the cultural diversity of the groups I tutor the following paragraphs outline some of the salient demographic characteristics of the students surveyed. A more detailed analysis, including illustrative figures can be found in Appendix 12.

The 52 students replying to the survey were resident in 12 different CE countries, confirming that the OU is attractive to a wide range of individuals, in a wide range of places. The mobility of the sample was illustrated in that the students surveyed were of 26 different nationalities, mostly diverse from their country of residence, (only 17% being resident in their country of nationality). The respondents were native speakers of 18 different languages, and I would suggest that the high mobility rate is closely linked with the respondents level of English. Approximately half of those surveyed were either NESs or considered themselves bilingual in English and another language. Of the remainder, almost all considered English as their second language and a high proportion (81%) indicated that English was one of the main languages used in their everyday life. The attractiveness of the OU to a mobile population with a high level of proficiency in English, is probably due to several factors, many of the students were mobile due to being employed by large multinational or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in which the 'lingua franca' of the organisation is English. Studying for a further qualification in English would accordingly be a logical choice for them, especially as they were often sponsored by their employer. Anglophilia may also play a part, Bennison's (2004:24) research on CE OU graduates identified a large group who were 'anglophiles', many of whom had had previous educational or residential experience in the UK or another English-speaking country and were studying with the OU because they had an '*affinity or professional interest in British culture and education*', and this was apparent also in this research.

When considering the students' previous educational experiences, in many cases the countries/languages that the students were educated in did not match with either their nationality or native language, nor country of residence. Evidence from the interviews indicates that in many cases this was due to the mobility of the student

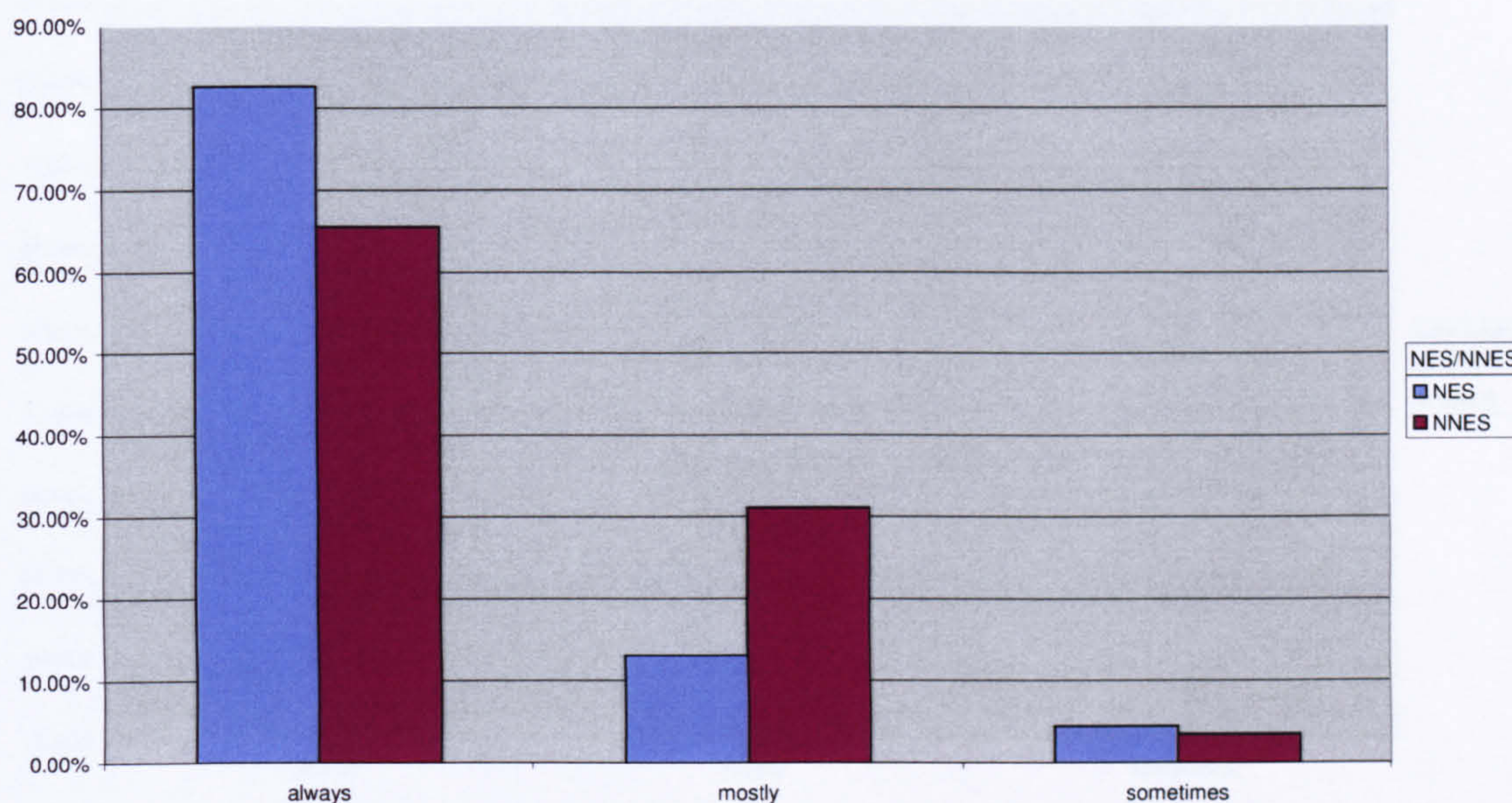
from a very young age. The respondents had been educated in 29 different countries, although when their main language of education was investigated, 48% responded that all of their education had been conducted in English, a further 27% were educated for part of the time in English, meaning that only one-quarter were not educated at any stage, prior to the OU, in English. This finding gives further evidence of the proficiency in English that students bring to their studies.

The R09 review (Shipley 2001:8) stated that '*There is some evidence that CWE students generally enter with a higher level of previous educational attainment than UK students*', and questions concerning students' previous level of education confirmed this. A high proportion (75%) of the respondents had undertaken some form of tertiary education and 58% had already obtained a first or postgraduate degree, prior to commencing their OU studies. This is a considerably different pattern to that seen in the UK, where one-third of OU UK undergraduates have entry qualifications lower than those usually requested by other UK universities (OU 2008b). When comparing the highest level of study prior to commencing with the OU, there was very little difference between the proportion of NES and NNES students who had completed either a first or postgraduate degree (56% vs. 58%).

Use of feedback

My second research question was concerned with whether there were differences in the way NESs and NNESs reacted and learned from feedback. In order to investigate my first and second research questions the survey contained a series of closed questions aimed at understanding how students used, reacted to, and understood their TMA feedback and the exemplars they had been sent.

As outlined in Chapter Two, several research studies have proposed that students have problems in acting on the feedback they receive because they do not understand it (Lea and Street 1998; Chanock, 2000; Higgins et al. 2001, 2002). Hounsell (1987) also suggests that failure to understand feedback comments and the assessment criteria on which the comments are based inhibits the possibility of feedback being used in a formative manner. The majority of students surveyed understood both the feedback comments on their TMAs and the assessment criteria that had been used during marking. Differences however, were apparent when comparing the comprehension of feedback comments by NES and NNES students. Figure 5.1 reveals that more NESs (83%), as opposed to NNESs (66%) always understood their TMA comments. Hyland and Hyland (2001) propose that some NNESs may fail to understand their teachers' comments due to indirectness on the part of the teacher, suggesting that teachers often soften criticism by the use of hedging devices, this may have contributed to the differences seen here.

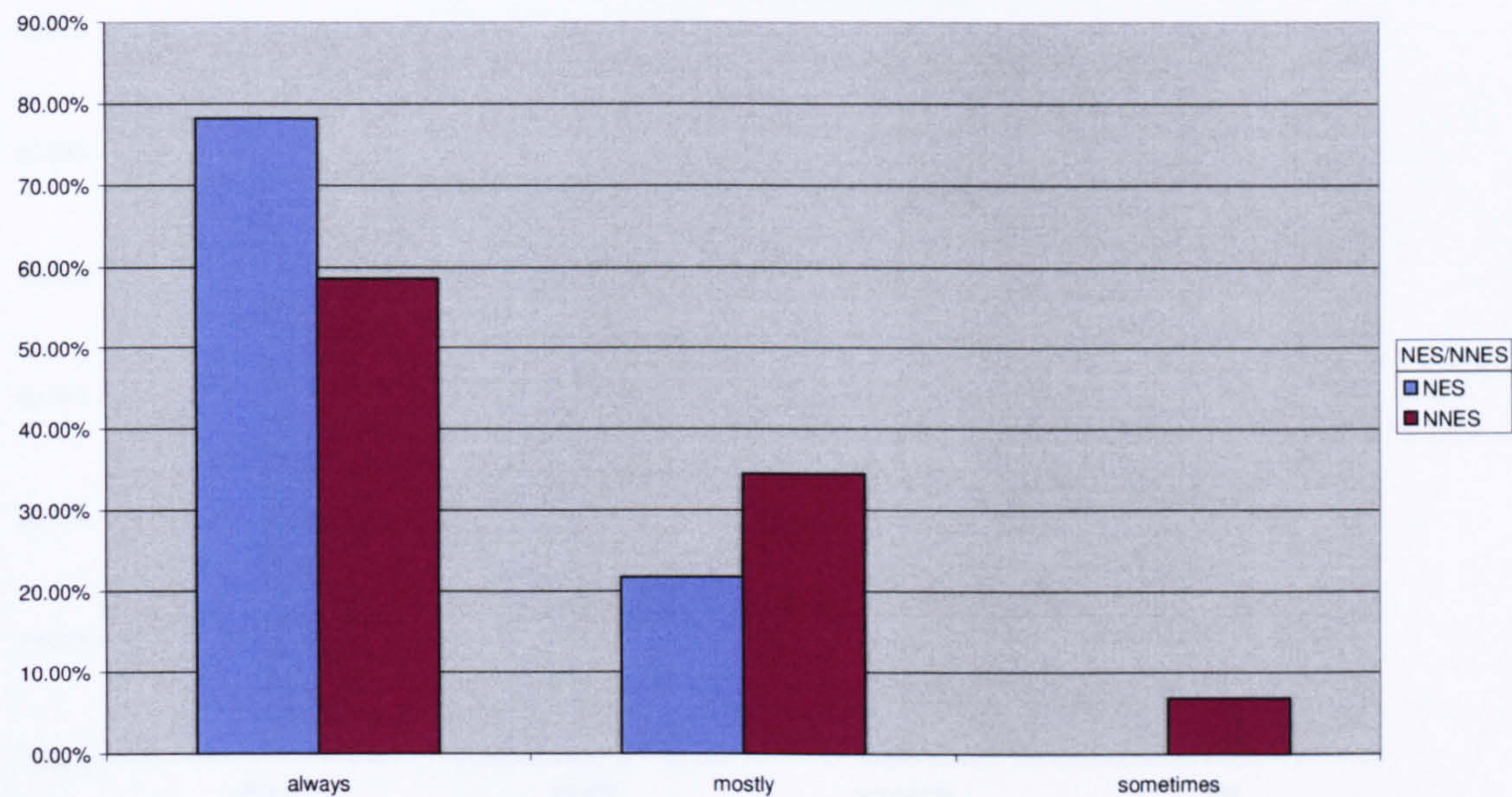


Did you understand the comments on the PT3s and the assignments?

Figure 5.1: Student understanding of TMA Comments

Hounsell (1987) maintains that the power of feedback is also decreased if students do not understand the criteria they are being assessed by, as indicated by a student interviewed for this study: *‘if you don’t really have any idea what people are after, then it’s more difficult.’* With respect to this, Figure 5.2 shows a similar pattern to Figure 5.1, with the assessment criteria being well understood by a larger proportion (78%) of NESs than NNEs (59%). Comments from the interviews however, indicated that assessment criteria were often only understood retrospectively, in the light of the feedback or more specifically feedback checklists attached to the marked TMA:

... the thing I found particularly useful was the part at the end where it actually categorised what was looked for in each particular grade and you commented against that ... I found that very useful, sort of knowing what was being looked for and what was expected (Lucy, British graduate, TI)

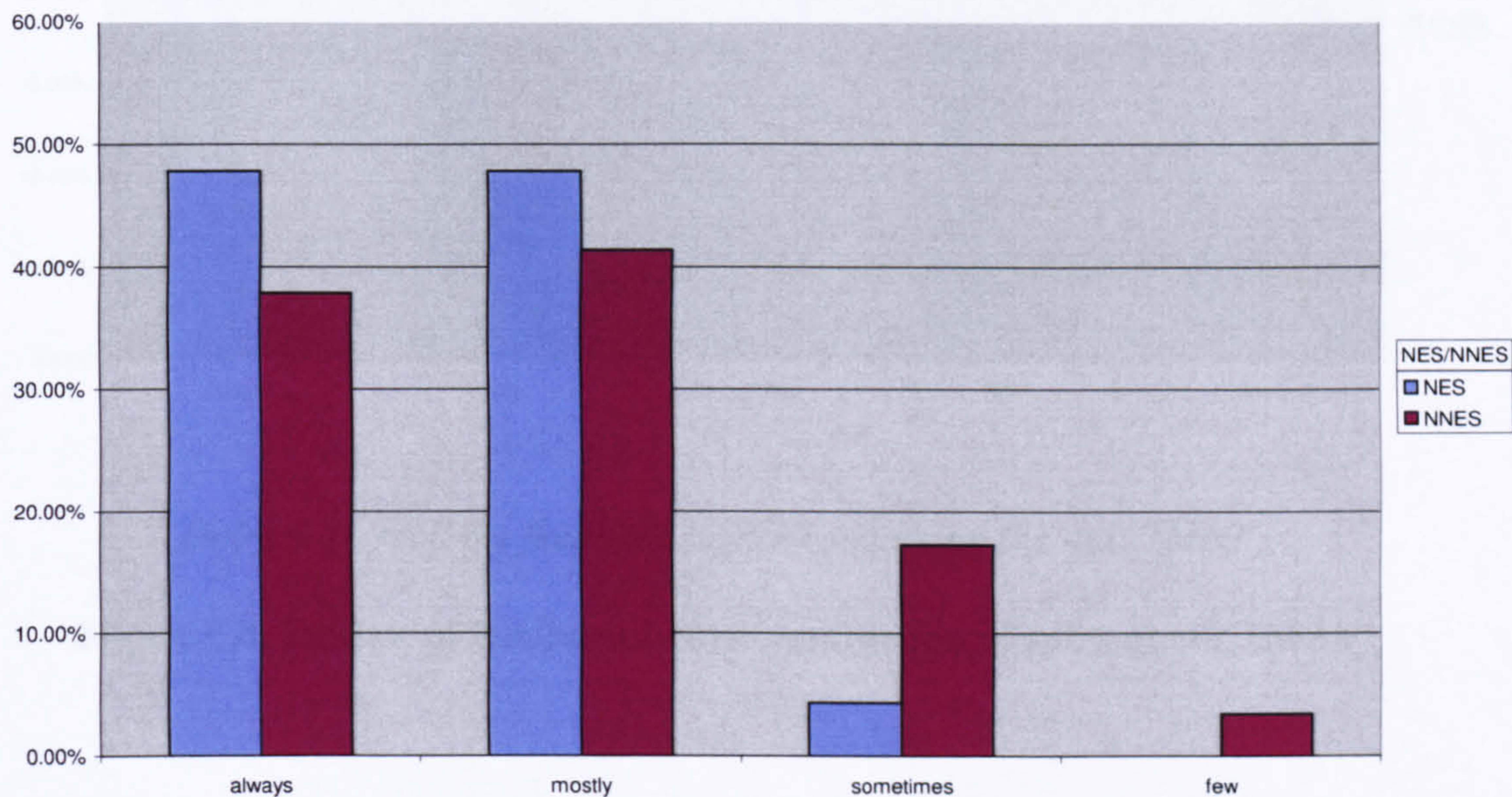


From reading the feedback did you understand why your assignment received the grade it did?

Figure 5.2: Student understanding of assessment criteria

There is a difference however, between understanding assignment feedback and being able to use that feedback to promote learning. Approximately 70% of NESs considered that their TMA feedback always gave them guidance on how they could improve on future TMAs, whereas only 41% of NNEs considered this, again highlighting a consistent difference between NNEs and NESs.

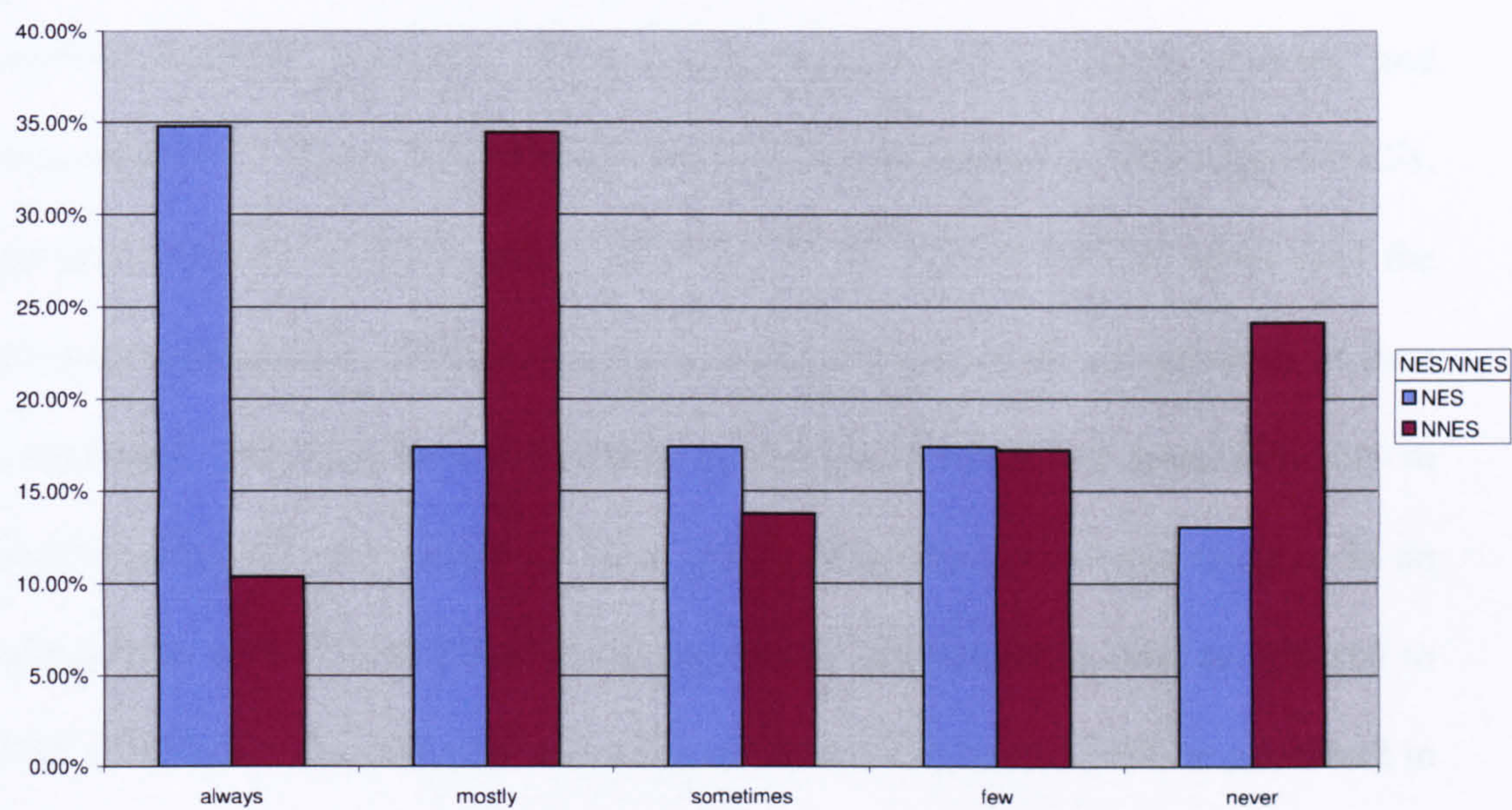
When preparing feedback I am aware that I need to provide constructive feedback that will move students forward in their learning, and that I should also consider the affective impact of this feedback. An underlying aim of the feedback I give is that it will lead to an increase in students' confidence in tackling subsequent assignments. Figure 5.3 confirms this aspiration, but also indicates that a slightly lower proportion of NNEs than NESs (79% vs. 96%) always, or mostly feel more confident after receiving feedback.



Did you feel more confident about tackling your next TMA after receiving the feedback?

Figure 5.3: Student confidence in tackling subsequent TMAs

If students are to move forward in their learning then it is important that they make maximum use of the feedback tutors provide. Figure 5.4 reveals that NESs were more likely than NNEs to always re-read their TMA feedback before completing their next assignment, (35% vs. 10%). NNEs conversely, were more likely than NESs (41% vs. 30%), to seldom or never look at the feedback before the next TMA. This finding may be due to an accumulation of the factors mentioned above: problems with understanding feedback may be compounded by a lack of knowledge of the assessment criteria, which interacting with indirectness and hedging devices used in giving feedback, may reduce even further NNEs' comprehension.



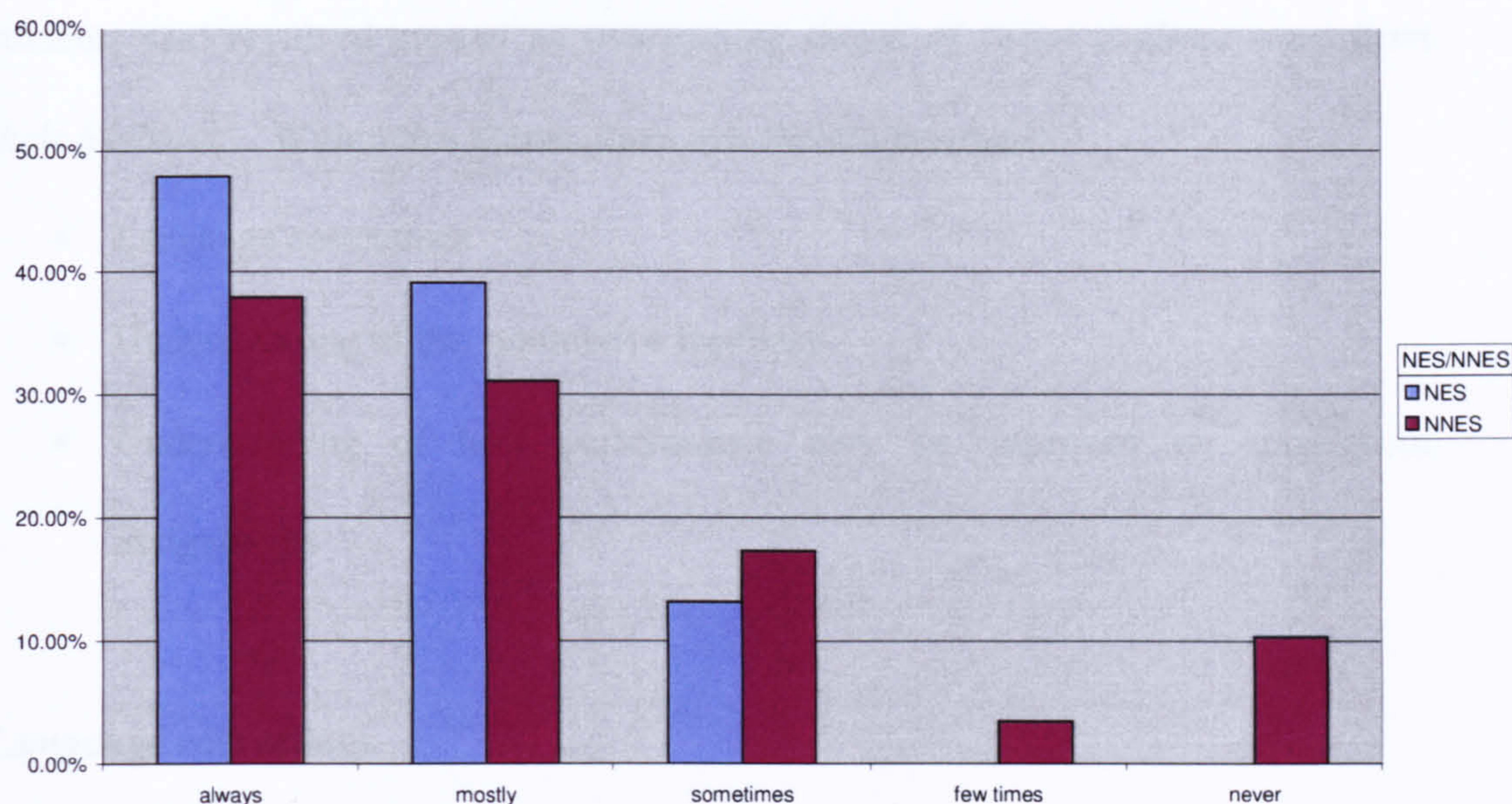
Did you re-read the feedback before completing the next TMA?

Figure 5.4: Review of feedback before completion of subsequent TMAs

Active interaction with feedback may also be indicated by the student following up references and suggestions made by tutors. The data illustrated that students are fairly reluctant to actively engage with feedback in this way, with only 26% of NESs

always following up specific references to course material made by tutors, as opposed to 17% of NNEs. In investigating why so few students followed up specific references, many students observed that this type of comment was not useful as it fed backward and not forward. A further factor may be that students are reluctant to do unassessed work and so are unlikely to go back to source material on an assignment already completed (Ecclestone 1999; Gibbs and Simpson 2002).

Research (Orsmond et al. 2002), indicates that the use of exemplars can help students move on in their learning. According to Butler and Winne (1995:18) one of the processes students can engage in when comparing their assignments to exemplars is '*comprehension monitoring*'; they indicate that this can be useful as it can '*activate internal feedback processes which are critical to self regulated learning and metacognition*'. Figure 5.5 illustrates that a higher percentage of NESs than NNEs, always or mostly, read exemplars, (87% vs. 69%). 10% of NNEs never read the example assignments, whereas every one of the NESs read the assignments at least sometimes. This may be connected to the fact that NNEs had more difficulty in understanding why the exemplars were good examples of what was required in an assignment, with 87% of NESs always or mostly understanding this, as opposed to 77% of NNEs. The different uses students made of exemplars will be examined in the discussion of the student interviews.



Did you read the example assignments I sent you?

Figure 5.5: Use made of Exemplar Assignments

The questionnaire ended with some open-ended questions which were analysed for common themes. The questions concerned students' opinion of their feedback and how it could be improved, and how they used the exemplars. Many of the replies elicited by these questions overlapped with those obtained from the telephone interviews, therefore the analysis of these questions has been included in the following section.

Thematic analysis of qualitative data from student interviews and survey

Twenty students were interviewed by telephone, eight NESs and twelve NNESs, of whom six in each group were my ex-students (see Appendix 1 for demographic details). As outlined in Chapter Four, I carried out a thematic analysis of the interviews with the aim of identifying '*patterns and processes, commonalties and differences*' (Miles and Huberman 1994:9). After reading and re-reading the

interview transcripts many times for the thematic analysis, I felt that much of what students said revolved around an overarching theme of '*what students want from their feedback*'. Within this theme, three sub-themes emerged:

- Language corrections
- Understanding of the summative feedback
- Understanding of how performance may be improved on subsequent assignments

Language corrections

For many students the flexibility of DL was a key issue in their selection of the OU. Many students sought a programme that allowed them to study at the same time as working or raising families. Many also said that they would find it impossible to change location or be constrained by the fixed timetable of a campus university. Tavola (1994) comments on the fluidity of the OU CE student population, frequently changing country and the opportunity to continue studying despite moving from country to country was obviously an attraction to some students. A further deciding factor was often the subject matter. Several students mentioned a lack of opportunity to study a particular subject in their home area or in this area in English. Studying in English was a high priority for some students for a variety of reasons. Some students did not want to, or could not study in the language of the country in which they were resident, as they did not speak the language of that country.

Tutors tend to believe that students study their subject because of an inherent interest in that subject, but this study has revealed that for some NNEs, the subject content was overshadowed by the fact that the course was presented in English, a way for them to maintain or improve their English:

the Open University for me, also was a way to keep the English going, to keep it alive somehow, because neither me nor my husband were born in England or this is not our mother tongue, so I wanted to find a way to speak English, every now and then.
(Ulma, German speaker, TI)

A students' motivation for choosing the OU will obviously affect their interaction with their feedback, if they have chosen the OU because they wish to maintain or improve their English this will direct what they see as the focus of their interaction with feedback. The student quoted above went on to express her desire for more language specific feedback:

As a student of a different mother tongue you always also had this language problem, but I think all my tutors tried not to correct my language or probably wanted to be polite ... and not to be too hard on the language side, on the other hand of course, it would be nice to be corrected. (Ulma, German speaker, TI)

This then, marks the first major division in what students desired from their feedback: a small number want their English corrected, as their main aim of studying with the OU was to maintain or improve their English. The majority of students however, wanted feedback to do two broad things: (1) give them a grade, and explain why they achieved that grade and (2) give them guidance on how to get a better grade on their next assignment.

Understanding the summative feedback

In order for students to comprehend why they achieved a certain grade, it is necessary for them to understand the assessment criteria against which their assignments are

judged (Hounsell 1987). Data from the survey (Figure 5.2, p.90) indicated subtle differences in the understanding of assessment criteria between NESs and NNEs. Most NES students understood how assessment criteria had been used, but for some NNEs the assessment criteria were not quite so transparent, and this caused consternation:

... in the course of last year I didn't really find out what it is really, when did I do it right and when not, and sometimes I received an unexpectedly high mark on a TMA and I thought why? This was difficult, really difficult for me and I wasn't sure what it was that they were expecting from me... (Caterina, Austrian graduate, TI)

Consistency between the mark awarded, and feedback given was also important and when this did not happen it was a cause for much disquiet:

I must say I found both [script and PT3 comments] very important, and the reason why I found them very important was that I often found them quite inconsistent, by which I mean to say that usually I got a raving opinion about whatever I wrote ... but then I didn't really get those great marks that I was expecting on the basis of those comments ... (Tabor, Hungarian graduate, Survey)

It is possible that cultural factors are at play here, with NNEs being unfamiliar with the OU's 'sandwich' style of commenting or the Anglo-Saxon penchant for using hedging devices, but it was not only NNEs who experienced this difficulty:

... the overall mark was a grade two pass, which to me didn't tally ...I couldn't figure out where I'd gone wrong, if this person was saying excellent here and excellent there, ... so that I didn't find

helpful at all, I wouldn't have known how I could have improved it.
(Angela, Australian graduate, TI)

The theme of 'justification' was also important with regard to comments, with students highlighting that occasionally tutors' remarks appeared arbitrary and they would have liked an explanation for the reasoning behind the comment.

Subject specific commenting

The ALs interviewed explained how they structured their feedback around both the subject content of the assignment and the way the student has completed the assignment. Students viewed this division as important in identifying the rationale for the mark they achieved, but not useful for moving them on in their learning. Students' comments about how they learnt from feedback were tempered with a feeling that once a TMA had been submitted the content aspect of it was finished with: *'I don't really engage with the essay again ...when you get the mark and the comments you're looking at the essay from a different place'*. This may be because of the fast, strictly timetabled pace of OU courses, which continually keeps students moving towards the next deadline. The general consensus of opinion was that comments that fed forward were of far more use than specific comments on an assignment that had become 'past history', expressed succinctly by this Swiss student: *'it's basically like you should have said 'b', but 'b' isn't asked in the next TMA and it's not very useful.'*

This brings me to the third sub-theme, students want feedback to give them guidance on how to get a better grade on their next assignment.

This theme generated the most student comments. Students had a ‘thirst’ for knowledge about how they could get a better grade on their next TMA, and it was this that appeared to lead to their desire for process rather than content feedback.

Content versus process feedback

ALs confirmed that a good deal of their feedback was commenting on subject specific points, such as what content was missing from an answer. Comments from the interviews though, indicated that students appeared to compartmentalise subject knowledge and not consciously see it as feeding forward into subsequent assignments. When questioned about the usefulness of specific feedback comments, few students mentioned subject related comments, with the majority remarking on their preference for more process orientated remarks:

it's easier when ... I find a more general item of feedback, ... where it says your structure isn't clear or whatever, it's easier to generalise that to the next TMA, rather than something highly specific regarding the subject matter of the TMA question, something I can take on to other TMAs, rather than the nit picking (Helga, Austrian, TI)

Both NESs and NNESs frequently commented that they learnt most from feedback that helped them to target areas to improve. Areas such as structuring academic discourse within essays and practical reports were mentioned, with both NESs and NNESs appreciating general help in this area such as ‘*like how to organise the whole essay, how to put up a good structure in essay writing*’ and more specific ‘technical’ help such as ‘*how to compile the references, how to make a correct reference list and how to write references in text*’.

Although the identification of weaknesses and areas to work on were critical, the highlighting of strengths were also important:

... you not only commented on what I was doing wrong (which made me change my strategy for handling particular issue) but what is more important, you also made comments on what I did right (which let me know that I should follow that path in future)
(Martina, Polish graduate, survey)

The priority knowledge that many students seek from their feedback, then, is how to obtain a better grade on their next assignment. In order to investigate how students obtain this knowledge I asked students what they did first on receipt of their feedback, and subtle differences were observed between NESs and NNEs' initial reactions to feedback. Many NESs referred to a 'mental dialogue' they had with themselves during their initial reading of the feedback:

... I'd probably have a quick read through the papers that I printed off and then I'd go home and stew on it and go through it in my head and think about what's been said, and what's not been said and how I performed, and that kind of element of it. (Leanne, British, TI)

Comments from NESs seemed to indicate that they viewed feedback in a more 'holistic' way than NNEs, they tended to focus less on specific details and rather more on the way the tutor had received the assignment, and the overall coherence of the whole feedback. A consequence of this was reflected in the common way that NESs interacted with feedback, which was generally through the use of 'mental notes' about the points raised, as indicated in the quotation above. Not all feedback

was actively attended to, nor attended to at the point in time when it was given, this NES perceptively explains the metacognitive processing that goes on:

... often what I did was just read the main comments but not re-read the whole essay because I couldn't bear to go through it yet another time ... The detailed comments I must say tend to just go straight through me, I'd think 'okay yes, that's right, yes I knew that that wasn't a good idea' or I at least realized that it was a bit dodgy ... I think learning from the comments has come over time or seeing their relevance anyway, ... it often happens that some feedback that I've had from you or other people when I initially get it back I don't pay much attention to it but then later on use it for reference, or later on I understand the relevance of it, which maybe I didn't to begin with. (Patrick, British graduate, T1)

This NES also acknowledges the holistic way in which he unconsciously uses feedback:

... your constructive criticisms they stayed there, I guess somewhere in my consciousness, and they're somehow, not necessarily consciously available, they're sort of unconsciously or semi-consciously available for the later TMAs. I didn't really use those constructive criticisms in a way to say 'ah right, now I have to pay attention to this and this, that was criticised in the last one and try to make sure that this next time round I don't do that kind of thing, or I do this better.' I didn't really do that kind of thing. I guess they're in the back of my mind, rather than the forefront of my mind when I was writing the next TMA. (Simon, British graduate, T1)

NNESs on the contrary tended to compartmentalize their feedback, often, rather than making mental notes many actually took physical notes:

... the last few times that I got a TMA I actually ... wrote things down that I wanted to do next time So I try to write down what they say, and then when I write a TMA I just focus on the actual subject and then I go over it again and try to see did I input the points that they actually gave me ... did I use it the way I think they wanted me to? (Karen, Swiss German speaker, TI)

Findings from the survey (Figure 5.4, p.92) indicated that NESs rather than NNESs were more likely to re-read their feedback before subsequent assignments but this was not so evident in the interviews, with both groups mentioning that they reviewed feedback periodically to look for any patterns that were emerging.

Both NESs and NNESs found feedback useful in helping them move towards becoming ‘insiders’, both in Anglo-Saxon HE in general and in their specific subject area:

... there was this uncertainty of how to cope with it, anyway with the language and all. I had to learn a lot about structuring essays and about the scientific way of writing references and providing evidence and also evaluation and that sort of thing ... (Ulma, German speaker, TI)

English language feedback

As might be imagined it was generally only NNESs who specifically mentioned using feedback to help improve their English:

...basically for the first two assignments it helped me a lot with my written English. The way of writing things, and the way of writing properly the report. (Leon, Brazilian graduate, TI)

The tutors interviewed confirmed that they did not penalise students for English spelling and grammatical errors and most NNEs appeared to appreciate this. What is not known though, is how much NNEs are penalised because they are unable to express their understanding of subject matter in an assignment. This Austrian student spoke strongly about this issue:

... the last tutor, she was a teacher, and she was very picky sometimes on small mistakes ... and twice or three times it happened to me that I wasn't completely clear on a sentence, she didn't understand it and so she didn't mark the idea, which I found a bit unfair. Okay if I'd been a native this would not have happened to me. (Caterina, Austrian, TI)

Stylistic language differences can also lead to miscommunications. An Italian student commented that in Italian, paragraphs were divided in a different way, there being 'a lot more main sentences ... and a lot of subordinates', whereas English she maintained, was 'subject verb-complement, full stop and then you start again'. This student was able to illustrate how this sort of difference had impinged on her communication within an assignment:

I remember once ... I put the comma in the wrong place or I didn't put a comma and then the subject resulted as an object or vice versa and ...it resulted as if Vygotsky did something different (Maria, Italian Graduate, TI)

The feedback that students use is not restricted only to what tutors write on PT3 forms or assignment scripts, other forms of feedback such as checklists and exemplars can provide students with important feedback.

Exemplars

I supplement my written feedback with exemplars and responses demonstrated that students did not just read the exemplars but actually analysed them, and used this analysis to develop their own assignment writing skills. All students, but particularly those who were NNEs, found them helpful as models of Anglo-Saxon academic discourse patterns; assignment structure; language; level of detail required and as illustrations of assessment criteria. Comments showed that students focused by far on the structure and style of the exemplars, rather than the content:

I found the example assignments very useful. After reading them I could understand better what is expected from us in terms of the proper essay structure as well as the required level of detail
(Alessandro, Slovenian graduate, Survey)

A recurring theme among the replies of NNEs, (and a few NEs), was the modelling of the English language that they provided. Whereas NNEs tended to focus on the details of exemplars, viewing them as models for syntax and semantics, NEs, being competent language users, generally did not need to use them in this way, and tended to focus on more holistic aspects. Aspects that were possibly outside the scope of NNEs, such as the subtlety of different ‘registers’: ‘*it’s a way of gauging what sort of levels of formality.*’ NEs also used exemplars to alleviate academic isolation and see how other equally valid answers are acceptable, and how other students take different routes in constructing their assignments.

Exemplars however, were not universally well received. Some students were inhibited from learning from them because they found them intimidating: *'They seem to have been written by a professor and I fear I could never write anything so good'*, or written in a style that was too diverse from their own: *'I often found the writing styles quite different (from how I would have written it) and sometimes this made it difficult for me to relate to the essay.'* Care must be taken in using exemplars, negative emotions may be elicited, as illustrated by this student in explaining why she did not read the example assignments very carefully: *'I suppose I was too annoyed they were better than me'*.

The final sub-theme was concerned with what mediates students' achievement of the knowledge they desire relating to how they can improve their performance on subsequent assignments. Analysis of the data revealed that three main factors were important in mediating the knowledge students gained from feedback:

- previous feedback experience
- Affective factors
- tutor-student relationships.

Previous experience of feedback

Students who had experienced an Anglo-Saxon educational system were generally familiar with receiving feedback, but for most students originating from diverse educational systems feedback was a new experience, as they tended to come from systems where assessment was solely based on exams with no coursework element. If coursework did not play a significant part in an HE system there was consequently less opportunity for students to receive feedback, as examination grades tended to be the only feedback received. Chapter Two illustrated some of the striking differences

between the British and CE HE systems and data from this study also showed that Anglo-Saxon and CE assessment practice differ considerably. Only one of the NNEs, a Scandinavian, mentioned experiencing an educational system that included coursework and feedback. Non-Anglo-Saxon students consequently, had a whole new set of 'rules' to become familiar with when they joined the OU. Differences between the OU's assessment system and the one students were familiar with, were frequently mentioned. Many students highlighted an emphasis on oral examinations in their home countries, which consequently meant that these students often came to the OU with very little experience of essay writing, and the skills associated with this, such as building an argument, citing and referencing. The emphasis on frequent examination sessions and copious opportunities to re-take exams also runs contra to OU and Anglo-Saxon traditions, where performance in the 'final' course/module examination is very important.

Affective aspects

Affective aspects of feedback can interfere with students' learning (Varlander 2008), it is important therefore that feedback does not stimulate negative emotions in students. I am aware that I structure my feedback carefully so as not to do this. In common with many of the ALs interviewed I generally use the traditional OU 'sandwich' style of presenting feedback (Atkins et al. 2002), beginning and ending feedback with something positive. Comments confirmed that NESs were familiar with this formulaic presentation of feedback:

I think it works okay, I mean it is a recognizable formulae ... you do think 'of course she's got to say that, she can't just totally slag it off', but no, I think that's a really nice convention. ... if you found

something wrong with it, it was clear what was wrong (Patrick, British graduate, TI)

They were also comfortable and familiar with the ‘hedging’ style of constructive criticism favoured by Anglo-Saxons:

I never felt deflated after the comments, if there was something negative then there was always something positive as well ... I never I felt knocked by the comments. (Veronica, British, survey)

Care needs to be taken though, with this standard formulation, as these students’ comments indicate: *‘I think positive written feedback is good, but if the mark doesn’t reflect this it can nevertheless be disappointing’* and *‘I always found it encouraging, but sometimes felt that probably comments were too positive i.e. ‘does she say this to everyone’*. As Chapter Two outlined, Anglo-Saxons favour the use of hedging devices to mitigate criticism. The ‘OU sandwich’ is just one technique used by ALs to convey constructive criticism in a way that does not activate negative emotions that block learning, but comments from some NNES indicated that this sort of approach may be a cultural convention that is not necessarily appreciated by CE students:

... although I must say I don’t mind about the negative parts. I really prefer to have everything straight to the point. (Leon, Brazilian graduate, TI)

A lack of confidence, especially among mature students has been shown to be related to poor rates of retention (Young 2000). A further aim of feedback is therefore to develop students’ confidence in their academic abilities. Responses from the survey

(Figure 5.3, p88) indicated that both NESs and NNEs were more confident in tackling TMAs after receiving feedback. Although as illustrated by this Italian, students' lack of experience with feedback may mean it is not immediately apparent to students that when their assignments are corrected it is not they, themselves, who are being judged, but their piece of work:

you wrote 'I'm so sorry that I can't give it a higher mark' and I was really depressed but then I ... realised that you were not judging me as a person, as a teacher or you weren't judging Maria altogether, but my work, what I did,... it's bad to be judged but it took time to realise you weren't judging me, but now I know the work, and I wasn't good ...(Maria, Italian graduate, TI)

Reassurance from tutors was also an important issue:

They [tutors] would not really says something that would discourage you ... my lowest marks that I got so far was 52, in fact on that very particular day I wept but the tutor send me a feedback, I mean encouraging me, saying all sorts of words, that at the end of the day I was very happy. I realised that I'm learning, and she or he is there to guide me. (David, Ghanaian OU graduate, TI)

Tutor-student relationships

The two sub-themes above highlighted how students' lack of previous feedback and emotional response to feedback can be important factors in mediating the knowledge gained from feedback. A further factor that was intertwined with these was the tutor-student relationship. Many CE students' previous educational experiences had indicated to them that teachers could not be questioned: *'most of the professors I had, they still had that thing where I'm the professor, you are the student and do not*

discuss with me'. Some students carried this feeling over into their OU studies and felt inhibited about contacting tutors:

they've [tutors] all been very friendly, and I'm somewhat wary of it, ... I was never sure ... how friendly it was supposed to be. I had problems because, ... I wasn't sure of how much I could come and ask questions. (Helga, Austrian, TI)

Others soon adapted to the OUs system, acknowledging its diversity from their previous system: *'It's [the OU] very different on this point ...I always felt very comfortable to discuss things and to ask things by mail or by phone'*. The ALs interviewed would welcome this, as illustrated in the following section which examines the other half of the feedback partnership – the givers of feedback, ALs.

Analysis of AL interviews

My third research question was concerned with how CE ALs respond to the cultural diversity of their tutor groups. Six CE ALs were interviewed by telephone (see appendix 2 for a breakdown of key AL characteristics).

As with the student interviews, student motivation for studying with the OU was perceived by ALs as significant. Several tutors confirmed that improving their English was an important factor for some students undertaking OU courses, although cultural variations were noticed:

... the other thing I find about Italian students is that they might be doing it because they want to improve their language, ... I don't get

that impression with the Greek students, I get the impression that they want to do it because they want a higher educational qualification, it just happens to be in English ... that's quite a big difference ... in Italy it's much more focused on the language ... which always seems to come first and then afterwards ... the content of the course comes in second place ... I don't get students .. who are looking for a university qualification, so much ... in Italy.
(Humanities AL Italy)

In order to respond to the cultural diversity of their groups, tutors felt that it was very important to receive background information on students prior to the commencement of the course. The OU supplies basic information, but unfortunately nothing on nationality or native language and very little on previous educational experiences.

Influence of culture and previous academic experience

In investigating the cultural diversity of tutor groups and whether or not this causes ALs to teach/provide feedback differently to NNES and NES students, I asked ALs if they found differences among their students that might stem from different cultural and academic experiences, and whether these differences influenced the feedback they gave. I discovered that issues of culture and previous academic experience are immensely intertwined. Even cultures that follow the same broad Anglo-Saxon academic tradition, such as Australia and the UK, interpret these traditions in subtly different ways. Various issues were highlighted:

it has influence on the quality of their understanding of the course and the type of TMAs they've written and automatically because of that, it's a two-way thing, their nationality and standard of previous education influences how well they've grasped and what they've picked up from the course and ... that automatically

determines the type of feedback that I'm giving and the sort of things you feel you can tell. (Social Sciences AL, Italy)

Certain areas such as ways of studying, essay writing styles and interaction with course materials were highlighted as being considerably influenced by culture and previous academic experience. Two of the tutors based in Italy felt that there was a sharp contrast between Italian and Anglo-Saxon students' attitudes towards studying, and the way these students interacted with the course material. Both tutors felt that Italians were less questioning in their approach:

Interviewer: What do you think are the main differences between the Italian system and the British?

Patricia: that we ask them actually to relate to what they're studying ... we don't ask them to study it parrot fashion ...we ask them to actually use it ... to give it back to us in their own words. About nationality ... well of course the Italians are used to listening to people talking ... they are not used to being able to tell ... that they don't understand or that they don't agree ... (OUBS AL, Italy)

A humanities tutor contrasted the way Italian and Greek students engaged with the course:

I've got a student this year and she's saying 'well whatever you say, I'll do what ever you say, I'm following all of your hints .. doing what you tell me and everything' ... and that seems to me quite an Italian response to teaching ... which I don't get with the Greek students, there was much more discussion and listening to what I was saying as a teacher ... a much more sort of interactive approach to learning. (Humanities AL, Italy)

The AL based in France observed differences in essay writing style between French and German students:

French students ... when they're writing they tend to be very vague and they always sort of want to philosophise about things and so it's quite important to point out to them that they've got to be more specific with things ...they write essays for ED209 as they're taught to write French essays and it's not necessarily the English way, they tend to be much, much vaguer altogether. But the Germans don't seem to have this problem, the Germans seem to write essays in the same way, well they write what we expect. It's their training in school I think. (Education AL, France)

This was also commented upon by the Social Science AL in Switzerland, who felt that '*Southern European, African and Asian students have to learn to be less flowery*'. Other tutors echoed the Anglo-Saxon/European difference, but in a different way, with one tutor commenting that Italian and French students have '*an excellent analytical standard*', which he felt helped them to learn quickly from feedback. Conversely he felt that Americans and Africans had come through different academic systems, which had left their mark on the way they approached studying with the OU.

Two of the Italian ALs commented on the cultural perception they had that Italians believe they need to learn a lot of 'facts', which they should then reproduce for their teachers, and that students do not consider that they are engaging in 'proper learning' if they do not do this. The tutor based in Switzerland also commented on the predilection of the Swiss educational system for rote learning. Comments from

students showed that they were also aware of this, with this quotation illustrating that the OU's active learning approach was preferred:

*I enjoy the OU style of teaching because it encourages understanding over memorizing and 'forces' us to think for ourselves instead of just 'regurgitating' what others have written.
(Irma, NNES, survey)*

It is important however, to beware of making cultural generalizations, as this AL points out, each student should be seen as an individual in their own right:

I don't know if you can generalise about using feedback ... for example I've got a girl this year who's saying 'I'm following everything you're saying'.... and she's from Calabria .. I had a woman a few years ago from Belgium and she always used to ring up and query my marks and query what I was saying ... but whether that's because she's Belgian or because she's her, I don't know, it's difficult to say really. (Humanities AL, Italy)

Tutor-student relationships

All ALs felt that culture influenced their relationship with students. With many commenting on the much more formal relationship that mainland European and African students seem to look for with their tutor. All the ALs based in Italy noted that the relationship Italian HE students have with their professors is very formal and that Italian students looked for this type of relationship with their OU tutors. It is possible that this deference towards the teacher may make students reluctant to question tutors in tutorials, although it was also suggested by a humanities tutor that this 'passivity' could be due to a lack of familiarity with a 'tutorial' style of education. This was echoed by the tutor based in France:

*the relationship with the teacher I think is very different in France
... certainly in France the teacher is a much more remote figure
than you would expect the teacher to be in the British system ...
(Education AL, France)*

The tutor based in Switzerland thought that the formality sought by CE students might be connected to the polite 'you' form that many European languages have, for example in referring to Swiss-Germans she said:

*it's to do with language as well, because most of the European
languages have the polite form and the informal form, it's sort of
in-built, and in most of those languages you'll have people who'll
take exception if you treat them in an informal way. (Social
Sciences AL, Switzerland)*

Tutors had to work hard on breaking down barriers of formality. For example the social science tutor mentioned above, emphasised her closeness to students by insisting that they called her by her first name and emphasising that her role was not that of a teacher but as a person who accompanied them on their educational journey.

Almost all of the tutors had some verbal contact with their students either through face-to-face tuition or telephone tutorials. The AL based in France, (but with virtually no students resident in France), talked about the remoteness of her relationship with her students and her feeling of being superfluous, as she never spoke to her students. Interestingly, she thought that her students, especially the German ones, actually sought out this remote relationship by very rarely initiating contact: *'the vast majority, don't seek any contact at all, over and above the PT3.'*

Italian HE classes can be very large, with groups of several hundred being taught in auditoriums and this may well inhibit all but the most confident students from speaking out. One tutor, though, was at pains to point out that while the academic set-up may be different and ‘foreign’ to those used to an Anglo-Saxon system, it never-the-less achieved a similar end product:

I mean the thing [Italian HE] works, so there must be something going on ... but I don't know how much really concerned work, to help out weaker students ... excellence still comes through, and I think that's the result of the general historical/cultural fact of Italian society really ... there are discussion groups and there's exchange of ideas somehow between families and colleagues and things like that. But I don't think the set-up, the formal set-up in the classroom with the seminars and tutorials and set pieces of work which are intended to be part of the learning process, I don't think that happens in the Italian university. ... I get the feeling that somehow through it all people do learn, and learn to a very high standard of excellence. (Social Sciences AL, Italy)

The OUBS tutor commented on the differences she had observed between Italian and British graduates and implied that this reflected the different approaches used in British and Italian HE:

if they're just Italian graduates then I'm up on the pedestal telling them things, if they're British graduates then they're used something that's slightly, more open. (OUBS AL, Italy)

Giving Feedback

Teachers may subconsciously change their behaviour in oral encounters with students according to their expectations of the students (Goldstein and Conrad 1990), and this

may also be the case with written feedback. I questioned tutors about the manner and type of feedback they gave, and the influence of a students' culture/educational background on this feedback, and several interesting issues surfaced. Only one tutor felt that a student's nationality or previous educational level had not influenced him:

I tend to treat everyone the same. I might correct their English but I try to consciously minimize any difference. (Humanities AL, Italy)

This tutor felt that the ability level of the student was a deciding factor in how his feedback varied:

I think how I might tailor it is, you know, a particularly interesting essay ... a well written essay, I might go deeper into the argument with the student ... so I sort of level it, I teach at different levels, so for example ... for a student I can see who's struggling with the argument ... I direct my comments at a sort of simpler level academically to them, whilst a student who is obviously very capable I might add something more in depth ... I think that's the main way I tailor it. (Humanities Tutor, Italy)

The other tutors generally concurred with this, but several did indicate that a students' background was influential in one way or another:

It is conditioned, although one doesn't expect it to be conditioned. So I don't go in thinking 'oh this is an Italian so I've got to mark it this way. (OUBS AL, Italy)

The AL based in France felt that culture influenced the type of feedback the students expected:

... the Americans, and to some extent, the English, like, expect, a sort of encouraging, positive tone and the French and perhaps other Europeans, but I'm not so sure about that, don't, I think that's a big cultural difference really. (Education AL, France)

As the comments above indicate, tutors are aware of their students' differing backgrounds and do bear this in mind when preparing their feedback. Tutors took their role of providers of feedback very seriously and often read students' work through several times. All tutors felt that it was important to be encouraging and many used the traditional OU 'sandwich' in structuring their comments on the PT3:

I really take seriously the sandwich thing, I always make sure I give a least two or three lines of praise at the beginning, pointing out the strong points and then I get into, as much as possible, doing general comments about it. (Social Sciences AL, Italy)

It was stressed however, that this traditional 'sandwich style' of giving feedback may be open to different cultural interpretations:

I think sometimes with the German students that they don't understand that you can say positive things and still give them a low mark. I think they tend to think, to feel, it's hypocritical, you know. Sometimes that's the cause of a bit of misunderstanding. (Education AL, France)

Tutors mentioned the need to use the feedback to build up a rapport with students, so the tone of the feedback was very important with some tutors aiming to 'avoid sounding teacher like' and trying to speak 'as one adult to another'. Several tutors

mentioned the importance of creating a ‘dialogue’ with their students through their feedback.

When asked if the students’ cultural background caused them to consciously change the language they used when writing their feedback, all ALs replied that it had some effect. Several comments illustrated how tutors were aware that NNEs might have problems with slang, colloquialisms or English humour:

sometimes, I’ll put something a little more clearly and a little less slangily ... I sometimes write more correct English in the comments than I would for an English speaking person and I don’t assume the same sense of humour either, because often I want to put something a bit jokey perhaps, and if it’s a German student I think maybe they probably won’t ... they’ll take it literally, they won’t see the jokey side or the cynical side of it. (Education AL, France)

certainly I do try to avoid it [colloquialisms, etc] if possible ...when you’ve got students from Germany ... you’re not quite sure how well you’re being understood ... so I’m aware that I can’t use certain phrases with certain people that would have made it very much easier. I’m aware that I find that hard actually, harder because it is quite a relief when I come to a mother tongue person and I can just sort of just come out with, you know, the nutshell stuff. (Social Sciences AL, Italy)

It was also stressed by one AL that there was a limit to how much tutors should modify their language, he considered that the students were studying with a British university and ‘*should be capable of understanding a British university tutor*’. Although several tutors praised the English level of their non-UK students there was

concern about what, and how much, to correct of students' English. When asked about language corrections, all tutors said that they did make corrections, although it was emphasised that these had to be balanced with commenting on the content of the TMA itself, and often only errors affecting meaning were corrected. One tutor encapsulated this by saying:

I will point out spelling errors, but reassure them that for me the important thing is that I understand what they're trying to say. If the meaning is obscured by their lack of English, then I'd have to point that out, but otherwise I don't consider it important (Social Sciences AL, Switzerland)

Some tutors used the tactic of totally correcting small portions of a TMA if they felt a student's English was particularly weak; tempering the need for correction with the desire to avoid '*too many red marks everywhere*'. Several tutors commented on the amount of extra work this entailed, and the need for guidance from the regional centre or course teams on what was acceptable, and whether it was actually part of their role. One tutor added an interesting insight on the possible origin of some student errors:

one of my students sent me part of his essay, which was in German, and what he does is he actually translates, so he writes in German, and then translates into English and this sort of explained a lot, he was going to the dictionary and saying 'right, what does this mean?' and of course it could be a false friend or the totally wrong word for what he's trying to say ... I then understood how his essays read the way they did. I don't know how many others do that but I suspect it with some of them. (Humanities AL, Austria)

Tutors did also stress that they corrected the English of NESs as well, if needed.

The issue of being, as an expatriate, an ‘insider’, was seen as an advantage in enabling tutors to understand why students make some errors:

I do a lot of translation and I understand the sort of mistakes that Italians tend to make, so I tend to try to point out common false friends like ‘actualmente’ and ‘actually’. (Social Sciences AL, Italy)

One foundation course tutor did actually suggest to students with poor English skills that they should interrupt their OU studies to complete a language course. This tutor also stressed that if the OU had better screening on entry for NNEs then this type of problem would be less likely to occur.

Student interaction with feedback

When asked if they knew what their students did with their feedback, tutors generally replied negatively, but their further comments indicated that most did believe that the majority of students at least opened and read the feedback, they justified this belief by seeing improvements in subsequent TMAs. But tutors also lamented the reverse of this, pointing out that the repetition of mistakes from one assignment to the next indicated that the feedback was not attended to. The AL based in France felt that more than half of her students barely looked at their feedback, basing this observation on the fact that students rarely asked for clarification or commented on the feedback in anyway. Other tutors also mentioned that they encouraged students to contact them to discuss TMA feedback but found that these offers were rarely taken up. The humanities tutor in Italy had actually asked students in tutorials if they read feedback,

and received affirmative replies. When asked though, if they actually discussed feedback with their students, most tutors did not actually do this directly. The OUBS tutor had an indirect method for encouraging students to reflect on feedback: the use of questions embedded within the feedback.

In interpreting these tutor comments it must be borne in mind that students from non-Anglo-Saxon HE systems may not be used to receiving feedback. In Italy this may be due to the fact that in Italian HE students are assessed solely by means of examinations, there is no coursework component. Receiving feedback is quite a novel experience and several tutors felt that CE students were very receptive to feedback because of this, and actually 'thirstier' for feedback than their UK counterparts:

I think students in continental Europe are more open to feedback than the ones in Britain... for a start, the continental European students are always very, very conscious of the fact that they're at the outposts, they very often think that students in Britain are getting a lot more than they do, so they're thirsty for support, much more thirsty than British students are and therefore anything you give them they will suck up ... they sort of think, perhaps because they pay a lot more, they see it as part of the service and they demand that service. (Social Sciences AL, Switzerland)

I asked tutors if they actively encouraged students to engage with their feedback or talked about how it might be used in the learning process. One of the social science foundation tutors was the only AL proactive in this area:

... I never make the assumption that they do know [what to do with feedback] I put it straight, you know ... from the very beginning, I say right, do you know what feedback is, what it's there for? I acknowledge the fact that it's difficult, that there's sensitivities, there's emotions involved, and I think it's very important in your first tutorial at level 1, at least to do that (Social Sciences AL, Switzerland)

Several tutors acknowledged, from their experience of being on the receiving end of OU feedback, that feedback can elicit a multitude of emotions, but again it was only the tutor based in Switzerland who dealt with this openly:

that's one of the things we do in the induction meetings and also in my first meeting with my students, where I sort of acknowledge how painful it is sometimes, how you leave your work open to criticism from somebody else. But then I put myself in their place, and I actually say I found it very, very hard and sometimes I got terribly cross with my tutor and very resentful, therefore I found the best thing to do would be to read the stuff and then just put it aside for a while and then read it properly a week or two later when I've calmed down. So, I try and make them see that I acknowledge the fact that they may not necessarily always be happy with what I've written but that sometimes they may have to remove the emotions and read it in a sort of more, sort of calmer way. (Social Sciences AL, Switzerland)

I questioned ALs about what they felt influenced how students learn from their feedback. One of the humanities tutors felt that a student's previous educational background was more influential in how they interacted with their feedback than their culture. He felt that those with no prior HE experience were more dependent on tutors.

Differences in cultural expectations

ALs acknowledged several areas in which they were aware of culturally different perceptions. It is commonly acknowledged that the first thing students look at when they receive their feedback is the mark. Students' perceptions of what their mark means is highly influenced by cultural and academic experiences. The tutor based in France contrasted the expectations of French and American students:

the whole ambience [in the French school system] is very negative, ... they expect criticism and marking for example is very low and French students expect low marks compared to American students, who'll expect very high marks regardless of the level of work. Americans always want straight As, don't they? They can't understand if they don't get straight 'A's all the way through, whereas French students would probably be happy with 10 out of 20 or 12 out of 20 for the same level of work (Education AL, France)

The OUBS tutor also made a point of explaining the differences between the OU grading system and the Italian one at the start of her course. Two issues that she saw as particularly pertinent were the pass/fail borderline – which is 60% in Italy as opposed to 40% at the OU, and what constituted a 'good' mark at the OU – '*anything over 80 is really very good*'. In Italy it is common to achieve 100% and '100 con lode' (100% with distinction) in exams and so she felt that it was important to explain why she felt she could not give 100%.

The advantage of being an 'insider' was often mentioned by ALs, in the example above a UK based AL would probably not be aware of the different cultural expectations. ALs generally felt that the issues of culturally different expectations

was not acknowledged by the OU. When asked if the marking guidelines contained any advice on marking TMAs from non-UK students, all of the ALs replied that non-UK students were not mentioned. One tutor commented that this topic had been ‘*a hot potato*’ a few years ago but was no longer mentioned, a humanities tutor even went so far as to say ‘*no, no there’s no idea that anyone might not be mother tongue English*’.

All tutors remarked that their course materials showed some Anglo-centricity and that a lack of shared cultural background might disadvantage their non-UK students. All tutors worked hard to try to alleviate the disadvantaged position they felt their students were in:

I think the organization of it [the course] is definitely very Anglo-centric ... the content is also definitely Anglo-centric ... because they’re talking about places ... often places in Britain, they’re talking about places that aren’t in Britain as well ... but there’s a bias sort of towards the UK ... (Humanities AL, Italy)

they make assumptions that students in continental Europe will understand the significance of the postal code in Britain. ... in one book there was a reference to Delia Smith, the cook or fund holding GPs, without explaining what a fund holding GP is. (Social Sciences AL, Switzerland)

One tutor acknowledged that the OU did seem to be taking on board this issue and that he had seen a decrease (but not elimination), of culturally sensitive material when his course was re-written.

An insiders' perspective

All the ALs had also experienced being OU students at the same time as being tutors, and felt that the experience of being on the receiving end of feedback, (both good and bad), had influenced the way they gave feedback to their students:

to a certain extent I've shaped my marking on my experience of being marked by tutors with the OU myself, and I've had good and bad tutors, mostly good, occasionally a bad one, which has also shaped me because it's given an idea of what I don't want to see in TMAs. (Social Sciences AL, Switzerland)

I'm a much better marker now that I'm a student ... I think I probably give more feedback now because I realise ... because I appreciate more feedback ... and I also try to be much more positive ... I always tried to be very positive up to a certain point but I've realised now how important that positive was ... (OUBS AL, Italy)

ALs also considered themselves 'insiders' in another respect, that of being an 'expatriate AL'. The OUBS tutor felt that the fact that she was an expatriate and had experience of the 'Italian system' was of a great help in her tutoring:

when I'm giving feedback and when I'm talking to my students I can understand ... how there must be some great difficulties with the English ALs who don't understand Italian or who haven't done any Italian accounting or things like that or don't know how things like that work here in Italy, although I'm not teaching them Italian accounting, I'm not teaching them about the Italian ways of doing things, I can keep it in the back of my mind ... I do think that the students get an awful lot more ... by the fact that we are ex-pats as well (OUBS AL, Italy)

This was echoed by the tutor based in Switzerland who felt that UK academics did not have a very clear view of what non-UK students might be experiencing.

Conclusion

This chapter presented a quantitative analysis of the survey data which illustrated both the range of diversity with respect to certain demographic features within the respondents but also certain communalities within the NNES respondents. Although not of British nationality or having English as their native language, a large number of these students were highly proficient in English and considered it as one of their main languages for their everyday life. Many of them, although not having been educated in the UK, considered that they had some Anglo-Saxon educational experience. Small but consistent differences were seen in replies to the survey questions considering the comprehension and use of feedback, with NESs showing both a greater understanding, and a greater use of various forms of feedback.

The chapter also presented the findings from a thematic analysis of the student and AL telephone interviews. Similarities and differences were observed between the way NES and NNES students use, interpret and learn from TMA feedback, some of which were linked to students' motivation for studying with the OU. With those whose motivation for study was English language based as opposed to subject based, having different priorities. The priority of the majority of students was a concern with understanding how the feedback received could be used improve their performance on subsequent assignments. Although receiving feedback was a new experience for most NNESs they were highly appreciative of it, and they along with NESs generally preferred 'process' rather than 'content' feedback. Subtle differences were seen

between NESs and NNESs' interaction and use of feedback, perhaps based on NNESs' unfamiliarity with Anglo-Saxon pedagogic practices, something discussed in more depth in the following chapter.

The thematic analysis of the AL interviews indicated these CE ALs are generally not ethnocentric and respond to the cultural diversity of their tutor groups in many ways, their 'insiderness' as expatriates helping them considerably in this respect.

The following chapter will examine the findings from the survey and the telephone interviews in the light of the context and the research questions outlined in Chapter One, and the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. In this penultimate chapter I will draw together the themes that have been running through this study in order to provide an answer to the research questions presented on page 17.

Chapter 6 – Discussion of Findings

Although previous research (Regan 1998) indicated that there is no such thing as a 'standard' tutor group in CE, due to the constant changes and movement within the CE population, I believe my findings can help to enlighten the broad picture of the CE OU student. While specific findings such as Italians not understanding what a tick means or Brazilians being used to a pass mark of 60%, may not be generalisable to all countries, they serve to sensitise tutors to issues they may take for granted. Other findings, such as CE students expecting the tutor to be proactive in initiating contact or the usefulness of exemplars in promoting learning may be more generalizable. In Chapter One I explained how I, a CE AL wished to explore learning from feedback, both from the perspective of the CE students who receive the feedback, and the ALs who give the feedback. Two of the main questions I wished to investigate were:

How do CE students learn from their TMA feedback?

Are there differences between the way native and non-native English speakers react and learn from TMA feedback?

My initial feelings, stimulated by a pilot study undertaken for a previous OU course, were that UK and CE students react, interact and learn differently from feedback and I believed that this might be due to cultural differences, differences in academic experiences or an interaction between these and other factors. Initially I thought I could separate out students' reactions, interactions and learning from feedback, but I quickly discovered that these three issues were closely intertwined. Students 'reactions' to their feedback, their feelings of encouragement or discouragement

influenced how they interacted with the feedback. How they physically and mentally interacted with the feedback influenced how, and what they learnt from it. The discussion that follows will therefore try to draw out the key points that arose, in respect of these question, from both the survey and the interviews.

Students are the receivers of feedback and for them to have something to receive there must be tutors to prepare and provide that feedback. Casual conversation with UK based tutors have shown that many have very little awareness that approaches to teaching and learning differ across cultural boundaries. In order to be good providers of feedback teachers need to recognise that their approach to teaching and learning is as culturally determined as that of their students, something I believe CE ALs are a step ahead of their UK colleagues in doing. My third research question was therefore:

How do CE ALs respond to the cultural diversity of their tutor groups?

I used interviews to investigate the perceptions of my fellow CE ALs with regard to how they respond to the cultural diversity of their student groups and how this affects their teaching and feedback practices. Several interesting issues arose from the interviews which I discuss below.

Native/non-native English speaker differences

A frequent theme of this research has been that NNES students do not necessarily know the rules of the Anglo-Saxon HE 'game'. The picture is not clear cut however, as this study has shown that many NNES students have experienced some Anglo-Saxon education, either in the UK or at an international school. Only a quarter of the sample surveyed were not educated at anytime in English. This familiarity may be a

double-edged sword, students who have partial knowledge of Anglo-Saxon education can give tutors a false impression of their knowledge. This may lead tutors to presuming students have more knowledge than they really have, rather than starting from the assumption that the rules are totally unknown. The students themselves may also mistakenly believe that because they have had a 'taste' of Anglo-Saxon education, they are familiar with the rules, again a more dangerous situation than complete ignorance.

The high number (81%) of students who stated that they use English for everyday life may again give a false impression of language ability. In CE we may have passed the stage bemoaned about by ALs a few years ago where NNES students were hampered by their lack of English skills. The ALs interviewed generally agreed that most NNES students write and speak English well, but despite this proficiency it needs to be remembered that they are not native speakers, and it tends to be the subtleties rather than the gross features of syntax, semantics or pragmatics that they do not pick up. For example a common place instruction in Assignment Booklets is '*Your answer should not exceed 1500 words*', it is clear to native speakers that even if they would like to write more, this it is not allowed, but the phrasing may be ambiguous to a NNES, who does not equate the 'should not' with the 'must not' that a NES does (Manning 2004). NNES have a facade of language understanding which these findings show is subtly different from a NES's.

The fact that none of the tutors interviewed felt that in general, the level of their students' English seriously interfered with their studies, may reflect a change in OU procedure in recent years, as country co-ordinators and OU webpages such as '*Am I ready to study in English?*' (OU 2007b) have been encouraging students to use British

Council or IELTS (International English Language Testing System) materials to make self-judgements concerning whether or not their English is of a suitable level. The development of English as a world language, leading to the increased emphasis on English as the main foreign language taught in CE schools may also have contributed; as may the trend for sending children to international schools or for families to be increasingly mobile, a fact supported by the survey findings that a high proportion of NNES students have experienced some Anglo-Saxon education.

Tavola (1994) suggests that CE students often commence their OU course accepting that they would not find it as easy as if they were studying in their native language and this was borne out in this research. In line with Le Mare and Tuffs (1995, as cited in Manning and Mayor 1999), most NNES acknowledged that it took them longer to read course texts and write assignments, seemed quite prepared for this, and did not want the OU to make special allowances for them. When I questioned students on whether not being a native speaker interfered with their studies I found very few students mentioning difficulties with the English language per se. A couple mentioned difficulties, not with the language itself, but with the concepts expressed by the language:

I wouldn't say my English is perfect, but I don't have any problems with reading it or with vocabulary and this kind of things. What is sometimes kinda tricky for me is to understand the concept behind an idea, but I really believe it's much more a cultural thing than a problem with language, a different vision of things. (Leon, Brazilian graduate, TI)

A Portuguese student mentioned problems with a psychology text that differentiated between sex and gender, something she said Portuguese did not do. Some students were also aware that they needed to maintain their new knowledge of subject specific vocabulary in both languages.

I experienced few problems in understanding and transcribing the interviews with NNEs, which provides evidence to support NNE students and ALs' assertions that their standard of English is indeed high. Interestingly, I had far more difficulty in understanding and transcribing the Ghanaian student's interview, (whose mother tongue is English), than I did with any NNE. This may fit with Brown's (1995) comments with respect to world Englishes, discussed in Chapter Two (p.37), as this student is from an outer circle country. I found both the cadence and syntax of his English difficult to follow, as they were different from my own. As mentioned previously, many NNEs had attended international schools, British universities or completed degrees in English in their home countries. There must be a high probability that these students will have been taught by NESs from inner circle countries, and consequently would be familiar with the pronunciation, pragmatics and syntax used by OU ALs.

A much higher number of CE students had experienced tertiary education than OU UK students. This though, may give these students a false impression of their competence because of their familiarity with higher level study. These students were used to studying at HE level, but within a different tradition, using a different sort of academic discourse. This may explain some of the subtle differences found between NESs and NNEs, the NNE students may have been familiar with HE, but were not familiar with the Anglo-Saxon pedagogic model used by the OU. They may have

found the OU's approach to HE, with its emphasis on students becoming independent learners very different from their past experiences (Manning, 2004). The OU's cognitive approach to learning, involving constant reflection on the part of the student and the gradual taking of increasing responsibility for learning, is probably an unfamiliar approach to the majority of non-UK students. In the UK, HE students are expected to express their own opinions and argue a point, this may be totally foreign to some international students who have not experienced this in their educational systems, where demonstrating knowledge is the key. Manning (2004) suggests that those from collectivist cultures such as Greece and Portugal, are not encouraged to have personal opinions and that these students have some of the severest problems in adapting to the OU's approach, a point reflected in Regan's (1998) survey which identified these countries as having the highest OU failure rate in CE. Interestingly though, an AL interviewed for this study found his Greek students to be much more active and questioning in tutorials than Italians.

Ramaprasad's (1983) definition of feedback (p.24), proposes that feedback constitutes information about the gap between an 'actual' level and a 'reference' level of a parameter that can be altered in some way. Sadler (1989:121) however, proposes that if the feedback is '*too deeply coded*' it may be inaccessible to the student. As research (Sadler 1989:120) has indicated that it is not uncommon for NESs to find feedback '*too deeply coded*', it would not be surprising if this were doubly so for NNEs. Walker (2009) has suggested that as well as indicating a difference between what the student had done (actual level) and what the student was supposed to have done (reference level), feedback should also help students decrease or close the gap between these two levels. In order to produce this 'useable' feedback Walker (2009:68) suggests that tutors must take a student centred approach

and 'work at Biggs's 'level 3' theory of teaching (Biggs 2003)', that is identifying students' concept of the topic and tailoring their feedback accordingly, aiming to help the student '*reconstruct his/her knowledge, understanding or skill such that it is closer to what is desired*'. This is no mean feat with NESs and requires additional skills where NNESs are concerned, as they may easily not understand, or misinterpret the specialised academic discourse used by the tutor. Due to the myriad of linguistic, discourse and academic experience differences that NNESs have, just telling students what is wrong or even indicating what is expected, is not likely to be useful feedback. As this student illustrates, they may only be able to learn from feedback when it is explained how their tutor's suggestions can help in narrowing the gap:

sometimes you would have said I should have putted something at that particular place, under that particular paragraph and I would have putted it a couple of paragraphs down the road, and I would be wondering why? You understand, you didn't say why you had to put it there ... this particular case you said 'here, you could have talked about that' but I talked about these things a couple of paragraphs down the road, and I was wondering, but why have I to put it here? (Iskra, Bulgarian, T1)

English language versus subject feedback

Both the survey and interviews indicated subtle differences in the way NES and NNES students use and interpret feedback. No student admitted to not understanding feedback but it is possible that by indicating that they 'mostly' understood feedback, the subtleties of incomprehension may be passed over. A finding that was also repeated with the understanding of the assessment criteria. Whilst understanding feedback is one thing, being able to put feedback into practice to promote learning is another. The gap between NESs and NNESs widens here, reflecting a

receptive/productive understanding of feedback. Survey findings showed that although a high percentage of NNEs understood their feedback, far fewer NNEs than NESs felt that the feedback gave them guidance for improving on future assignments. Also fewer NNEs than NESs followed up references given in their feedback. Before discussing these issues in more depth, it is important to consider a factor that has ramifications for how students receive and use their feedback – their motivation for studying with the OU.

Broadly speaking there was a distinction between those who were studying to gain subject knowledge and those whose main interest was in improving or maintaining their level of English. This second group of students may experience problems in their studies if they are playing the ‘HE game’ with the aim of improving their English, whereas the focus of their tutors ‘game’ is subject knowledge, rather than English language knowledge. Unless a student offers information about their motivation for OU study, which is rare, given the little face-to-face contact that tutors have with students, it is unlikely that tutors are aware of the various motivational drivers that prompt students to study with the OU. Only one of the ALs interviewed was aware of this and acknowledged that many of his students were studying with the OU to improve their English, he did feel though, that this was a significant factor only for his Italian students. Another tutor felt that CE students might be using an OU degree to validate their level of English, but this is slightly different from using the course to improve their English. While ALs are specialists in ODL HE, and also specialists in an academic field, they are not usually EAL teachers. The OU employs ALs to tutor a course and consequently ALs see the main thrust of their tutoring as subject based. This may run counter to the aspirations of those students whose key motivation for OU study is to maintain or improve their English, with an increase in

subject knowledge a secondary consideration. This mismatch of focus was apparent in some interviews (p.96), with students requesting a higher level of correction of their English than tutors were giving. If an AL is unaware of the student's motivation for studying with the OU, this may lead to some students not using or learning from their feedback, because it does not fit with their motivation to study.

Tutors were concerned with what, and how much of their students' English to correct. Some did not want to cover assignments with corrections, whilst others felt correcting students' errors was a relatively trivial and time wasting activity, and that the time could be better spent on subject focused issues. A lack of language correction however, may mislead students. Hyland (2001:241) quotes a student who was surprised by the number of language errors identified by his new tutor and felt that his previous tutors had *'mislead him into repeating errors by omitting to mention his common language problems.'*

Students' reactions to, and interaction with feedback

A significant finding from this study is that students do collect and attend to their feedback. Hounsell (1987), Lea and Street (1998) and Wotjas (1998) suggested that many students only look at the mark and that some do not even read or understand the feedback, something not substantiated here. This may be because the aforementioned research concerned campus based students who have access to other means of monitoring their progress and improving their learning. For OU students TMA feedback may be their only contact with their tutor and so has heightened value. A further factor is that OU students do not have to actively seek out their feedback, it arrives unsolicited in their post/in-box. The significance of feedback to OU students is illustrated by students who spoke about being unable to fully move on in their

learning, as the 'cycle' was incomplete until feedback had been received: *'it's almost as if the TMA isn't finished until it's got the feedback'* and *'the wait would slow down my studying process on the next TMA'*, something that may not be apparent in campus based universities where lectures, laboratory sessions, seminars or tutorials are attended; and programmed and ad hoc feedback allow students more opportunities to monitor their progress.

Learning styles

Generally all students read feedback as soon as it was received, and many talked about a 'mental dialogue' that went on during this first reading. In line with the research by Weaver (2006) it was apparent that many students had difficulties in knowing the best ways to use feedback to help them move forward in their learning. Some students relied totally on mentally absorbing the feedback and using their ruminations to assist them on their next assignment. A few students were more active in their use of feedback, with some taking notes and others synthesising feedback accumulated from several assignments to highlight points to address. A general pattern that emerged was that NESs tended to interact with their feedback mentally, whereas NNEs were more likely to highlight parts of the feedback or to make notes. This may reflect both the native speakers' ease with the language of feedback and consequent ability to reflect on the meaning, and the fact that receiving feedback was often not a new experience for NESs (discussed on p.105). NNEs seemed also to focus more on the literal word-for-word content of the feedback, trying to match individual remarks to specific sections of their assignment, rather than looking for global meanings. This may link with Sherman's (1992:192) suggestion, which although focusing on Italians, may well be pertinent to other European students. She proposes that when studying, Italian students tend not to

read interactively or '*dialogue with the text*', supporting this proposition by suggesting that if the textbooks of Italians were examined large amount of highlighting would be observed rather than marginal notes, comments, or questions.

No student mentioned having any guidance from their tutor on what to do with the feedback they received, or instruction on how they might use the feedback to improve their learning. This combined with NNES lack of previous experience with feedback might well have led to students developing idiosyncratic approaches to interacting with feedback.

Lack of feedback experience

This difference in approach between NESs and NNESs could be due to a lack of experience in receiving feedback. Many NNES students came from educational systems with completely different assessment systems to the Anglo-Saxon model. Only the Danish student had experienced a system where coursework was used as a means of assessment, consequently virtually no students outside of the Anglo-Saxon system had experienced feedback, (other than an examination mark), before. Examination systems were described that differed tremendously from the OU's both in practical and pedagogic ways. For example, many students described systems where examinations could be sat at many points during the academic year, with the onus on the student to decide when. Systems were described where students were able to decide whether or not to accept the grades awarded, there being many opportunities to retake exams.

Oral examinations also played a large part in many students' assessment experiences. The emphasis on oral examinations, at both school and HE level in mainland Europe

(Shipley 2001; Denholm, 2004), sheds light on several areas of difference observed between NESs and NNEs. Assessing knowledge orally and in a written format is very different, the structuring of arguments may be different and referencing and plagiarism issues will be of lesser importance. Linked to this is also the point raised by Sherman (1992:192), for many Italian university courses there is only one set book which is often *'written by the lecturer, who is also the examiner and will expect to have his own work repeated to him in the examination'*, something which may obviate the need for referencing. The lack of impartiality of examiners in other educational systems was also raised, with students mentioning how they believed their relationship with their professor may have influenced the grades awarded, more than their actual examination performance. Denholm (2004) supports this, only two (Denmark and Ireland) of the eight European HE systems she examined used external moderators. Differences in pass/fail boundaries and pass rates were also mentioned frequently, but not only by international students. While the receiving of feedback was a new experience for most NNEs students, they liked the system and became in the words of one AL: *'much more thirsty [for feedback] than British students are.'*

Process versus content feedback

This research confirmed that of Brown and Glover (2006) and Carless (2006) that students appreciate feedback. On pp.134-5 I discussed some students' desire for language rather than subject focused feedback, here though, I wish to concentrate on subject feedback. I found that in common with research from Glover (2004) all students preferred, and used more actively, feedback that fed forward, and that while they appreciated specific subject content comments on assignments, such as the range and appropriateness of the material they had included or the highlighting of any omissions, they, as did Walker's (2009) students, generally paid far less attention to

these types of comments. Students overwhelmingly focused on comments that dealt with the 'process' and 'skill' of writing the assignment rather than the content - that is, comments about the structure of the answer; essay/report writing technique; whether the actual question set had been addressed; referencing, etc. This finding should not be surprising, Chanock (2000:97) has indicated that '*students are not insiders in the disciplines they study*', and this combined with NNEs lack of insiderness in the Anglo-Saxon educational system, means that students comb their feedback for indications about how they might become insiders.

To become an insider or to play the game by the appropriate rules, students need to become familiar with, and competent in using the academic discourse of their subject. Chapter Two (pp.40-42) discussed the enormous cultural influence on presenting academic discourse, for example Galtung (1981) stresses the importance of the 'elegance' of an argument in French academic discourse where aesthetic aspects, such as balance and symmetry matter, as opposed to the dryness of German social science prose. A high proportion of OU CE students had experienced tertiary education and were consequently used to reading and writing academic discourse in the style of their native language. Kelley (1986) suggests that the metacognitive aspects of writing in a first language transfer to writing in a second language, this would suggest that these students also transfer the academic discourse patterns and other devices that have made them successful in their home culture, to their OU writing. Galtung (1981:841) also maintains that there is a close relationship between intellectual style and academic discourse, stating for example, that there seems '*to be little doubt that the German language is well fitted for the Teutonic intellectual style*'. It was not surprising then that NNEs focused to a greater degree on feedback

that would help them become insiders, whereas NESs preferred feedback that illustrated the range of acceptable discourse patterns:

I appreciated seeing different ways of doing things and I guess that just helped me realise that there's no one right answer, which is quite a healthy thing when you're studying. (Simon, British graduate, TI).

Emotional issues

Chapter Two (pp.30-33) discussed how affective aspects of feedback can interfere with students' learning. In order not to stimulate negative emotions, I and many fellow ALs use the traditional OU 'sandwich' style of feedback (p.106). This structuring appeared to be well known and accepted by students coming from Anglo-Saxon educational systems, reflecting Galtung's (1981:824) observation that the Saxon style encourages debate and discourse and that others involved in the debate should '*be built up not put down*'. Both student and AL interviews provided examples that illustrated the lack of appreciation of international students for this convention and observations of how it might be open to different cultural interpretations. One AL specifically suggesting that German students find the OU practice of giving positive comments even when a mark is low, hypocritical. This would support Galtung's (1981:825) observation that in the Teutonic intellectual style they '*go straight for the weakest point ... with no attempt to mop up blood or put wounded egos back together.*'

Research in Anglo-Saxon HE established that positive comments increased students' confidence and the learning potential of feedback, with negative comments having

the opposite effect (Weaver 2006). For students to learn from feedback they must attend to it and negative feedback can prevent this, as sometimes students can be *'too agitated to take in exactly what the tutor is saying'* (Chanock 2000:95). British students have identified the balance between positive and negative comments as important, reporting that even the slightest positive comments makes them feel good (Weaver 2006). Price and O'Donovan (2006) maintain that a lack of positive comments makes it difficult for students to understand and engage with the feedback and to use the feedback in future assignments, but the matter is not as straightforward as this, both for Anglo-Saxon and international students. Hyland and Hyland (2001:208) advocate that students may *'discount token or formulaic positive comments'* and Young (2000) cautions that feedback that is overly concerned with cushioning criticism may lose its usefulness.

Hyland and Hyland's (2001) research (p.29) indicated that the indirectness of teachers' comments can cause students to fail to understand them. In this study the Anglo-Saxon penchant for using hedging devices to temper criticism and the need to *'break bad news gently'* was also found to not be universally accepted, with one Brazilian student maintaining that he did not mind negative criticisms and preferred to have everything straight to the point, and another Hungarian student stating that he did not need to be *'psychologically encouraged'*. This student was also very concerned by what he saw as inconsistency between his grades and the comments on his TMA: *'I got a raving opinion about whatever I wrote ... but then I didn't really get those great marks that I was expecting on the basis of those comments'*, rather than actually reflecting inconsistency this may illustrate a cultural mismatch in the way feedback is intended to be interpreted.

Relationships

The issue of 'power' is very important in the giving of feedback. As givers of feedback teachers, in the eyes of their students are often seen as 'authorities' and 'experts', and this encourages the view that the giving of feedback is a one way transmission process that *'ignores the active role the student must play in constructing meaning from feedback messages'* (Juwah et al. 2004:7). While in the OU the 'tutor' is different from the 'teacher', there is still the situation that the person who is trying to build a relationship with them is also their assessor, and for NNEs, a native English speaker.

This study has shown that sometimes both ALs and students find their roles and relationships unexpected. Bailey (2004/5) suggests that those students coming from a high power-distance cultures such as France or Greece may invest the teacher with considerable and unquestionable authority, there is also the view of the teacher as the font of all knowledge, as illustrated by this comment from a Serbian student: *'you couldn't ask questions because if you asked questions there is the possibility that the professor won't know the answer, and he wouldn't want to appear ignorant.'* This view of the omnipotence of teachers could bring problems for students in adjusting to the autonomous learning model and tutor-helper model espoused by the OU. The OU has a rather unusual academic set-up, with the AL as the facilitator rather than teacher of student learning, a relationship that may be unfamiliar to many students (pp.132-3). The informality of the OU student-centred approach can be uncomfortable for some students, as illustrated by the tutor from Switzerland who had to work hard to get students to call her by her first name (p.114) Other students contrasted their previous 'powerless' relationships with professors to their more positive experiences with the OU:

... most of the professors I had, they still had that thing where I'm the professor, you are the student, and do not discuss with me. It's [the OU] very different on this point. (Leon, Brazilian graduate, TI)

A further problem is that students unfamiliar with the OU may see ALs in the role of teachers of the course rather than tutors. They will not be aware that ALs are generally appointed '*for their academic specialism and experience of adult education*' (Manning, 2004:10) and that they have not written the course materials, neither may they understand why tutors are not experts in all parts of the course.

In commenting on teacher-student relationships many NNES students indicated that they had come from a system where teacher-student relationships were much more formal than at the OU:

... the relationship was extremely formal, that's why all the time you have this wall between you and them and you sometimes are even afraid to knock on the door during the time they are usually receiving students to ask questions ... (Alberto, Italian graduate, TI).

Galtung (1981) sheds some light on this when he suggests that a Saxonian academic culture encourages debate in relatively more socially equal relationships, while the Teutonic approach is based more on a vertical 'master-disciple' relationships. Another significant factor may be that a country such as Germany has a relatively high uncertainty avoidance rating, which tends to cause students to view their teachers as experts with whom it is not expected to have an intellectual difference of opinion. During the interviews students did hint at reasons similar to Galtung's as being responsible for the differences in relationships, an Italian student summarised

this nicely when he commented on his feeling that that in the Italian educational system teachers were judges, wanting to fail students if they could, whereas in the OU he experienced a more collaborative relationship, where *'the point was to learn things in the best way, not necessarily by suffering.'*

Comments from ALs reflected cultural differences in levels of student interaction, with one tutor describing largely passive behaviour from his Italian students in contrast with the active questioning behaviour of his Greek students. With respect to formality, tutors also saw an overwhelming difference in the formality of their relationship between those students who had experienced a central or Eastern European or African educational experience and those from an Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian or US background, which like Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), they often linked to the power differentials seen in these countries. ALs commented on the greater power that their HE colleagues in Europe appeared to have and connected this partly to the pyramidal structure that is used in many European HE systems and partly to the examination system, which unlike the OU's anonymous marking system, gives teachers total autonomy in whether their students pass or fail. One tutor even suggesting that her Italian students were largely passive because they feared that questioning the AL could result in marks being deducted from their assignment scores.

Cultural factors can cause relationships to be open to a myriad of misinterpretations, one AL talked about feeling superfluous, (due to the fact that she was rarely contacted by her students) (p.114), but this may have been a misinterpretation of the students' behaviour, as she may have been expecting them to be proactive, whereas they were expecting her to be the one to initiate contact. Another felt that because

students did not ask for clarification or make comments about the feedback that they had not bothered to read it, this may not be so, rather reflecting the perceptions that students have of the tutor-student relationship, with some cultures feeling that they are unable to criticise or even remark upon their tutor's comments. Research has shown that there are many cultures where it is not at all acceptable to comment on your teachers' work (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005). The behaviour that ALs interpret as passivity or lack of interest in feedback may consequently be a misinterpretation on their part, with students being by their own cultural standards, polite rather than passive. In large power-distance countries such as France, Portugal or Greece students may expect the teacher to initiate communication, so while the AL may think that they have initiated communication in the sending of feedback, students are waiting for the tutor to open a dialogue on the feedback. If teachers see their response (feedback) as the end of the interaction, then students will also stop there.

A further complicating factor that must also be borne in mind is that the distance inherent in the OU may attract students who are by nature asocial. Although without doubt culture influences the relationship between student and teacher, personality may also play a role and there will always be a small number of students who prefer to study without human contact and they may find the OU a suitable environment for this.

The fact that the AL is usually a native English speaker also puts them in a position of power but there are other linguistic factors that may be important. Two German speaking students and several ALs suggested that the verb forms used in languages might also contribute to the formality of the relationship between European students and their teachers.

In sociolinguistics, a T-V distinction was introduced by Brown and Gilman (1960), with reference to the initial letters of the 'tu' and 'vos' pronouns used in Latin. This distinction describes the situation in which a language has second-person pronouns that are used to distinguish varying levels of politeness and social distance. Brown and Gilman argue that the choice of form is governed by either relationships of 'power' and/or 'solidarity', depending on the culture of the speakers. For example in Italian HE, the 'lei', (second-person plural), form of verbs is used by students when addressing their teachers, while the teachers use 'tu', (second-person singular), which underlines the difference in power between the student and the teacher.

Modern English has no T-V distinction so it may be confusing for a NNEs used to using a native language that has this distinction, (as many European languages do), to assimilate the differences in English. English, in having no syntactic T-V distinction plays by different rules in the formal/informal game, such as addressing someone by their first name or last name, or by using *sir* and *ma'am*. The move from formal to informal forms in English can be gradual with each person using subtle cues to aid the move. In other languages there is less subtlety, for example Italians who wish to use the informal verb form actually say '*diamoci del tu*' (let's use the informal rather than formal 'you').

Students' lack of familiarity with this aspect of English may be reflected in various ways. It is possible that it encourages students to wait for tutors to make the 'first move', this would discourage students from being proactive in asking for clarification of TMA feedback, something mentioned by several ALs. In a game with unfamiliar rules students may also err on the side of caution and use more formal language.

This use of language to maintain the teacher as a formal, remote figure in some European HEIs is in direct contrast to the view of many of the ALs interviewed who saw themselves not as academics, but as people accompanying and collaborating with students on their educational journey (p.114). A view expressed by this student when comparing the OU with his native Italian HE system:

At least with the Open University, I had the feeling that the professor and the whole system was treating the students in a more responsible way ... I had the feeling that the system was treating me more as an adult and that the purpose of the people there was not to fail me or to show me how bad I am because I didn't study, but it was more a sort of collaborative framework. (Alberto, Italian graduate, TI)

Exemplars

Research has shown how exemplars can be useful in moving students on in their learning and of making marking criteria and subject standards explicit (Sadler 1987; Orsmond et al. 2002). Sadler (1987:200) describes exemplars as '*key examples chosen so as to be typical of designated levels of quality or competence. The exemplars are not standards themselves but are indicative of them as they specify standards implicitly.*' O'Donovan et al. (2004:332) suggests that exemplars (such as first class assignments), can be an effective way of demonstrating standards required and may support '*the transfer of tacit knowledge that is otherwise difficult or impossible to articulate.*'

The above concerns the formalised use of exemplars but it should also be remembered that at campus universities students frequently spend time comparing work, marks and tutor comments on a less formalised basis, something that, while

not impossible, is more difficult for OU students to do. I frequently attach exemplars to my feedback, comments from students who were not my ex-students however, indicated that other tutors do not encourage students to share marked assignments and I believe that these students may be missing out on a useful learning opportunity, as one student succinctly put it '*it's [exemplars] the sort of thing people are crying out for when they first start especially if they haven't done a course before.*'

This study has illustrated the many ways in which students found exemplars helpful. NNES students were particularly appreciative of exemplars and used them to assist in their language development. They also found them useful as a way of demonstrating unfamiliar academic discourses. Native speakers also found them valuable, citing their usefulness in illustrating alternative ways of structuring arguments and putting points across. A word of caution is needed however, as sometimes exemplars were criticised, with students not always understanding what the exemplar was a good example of. This could indicate that it might be more useful to use selected aspects of assignments, rather than whole assignments and to provide an accompanying commentary.

My second research question asked: *Are there differences between the way native and non-native English speakers react and learn from TMA feedback?* I feel that this study has demonstrated that the answer to this question is 'yes', but that this is a huge area with many interrelated factors that impinge upon one another. Every student, NES or not, comes to their OU studies with a different personal, cultural and educational history and a different set of inherent characteristics (personality variables, cognitive ability, learning style, etc), that will mean that they interact and learn from their feedback in different ways from their fellow students. This study

though, has shown that factors such as culture and previous academic experience are very important. Each national system of HE has distinctive features and differences in the pedagogical approach used, so it is not surprising that the international students interviewed had very different educational experiences and sometimes different expectations to UK students.

Differences were apparent in the process and product of education. With some students suggesting a sort of obstructive-supportive divide between their home educational systems and the OU, as illustrated here:

... I know [in the OU] I won't be tested on material that wasn't recommended or that wasn't provided for me. Whereas in my country we had to be very wily and find out which book we should study from. It would never be the book that we'd been recommended. Here the idea's to give information to students, whereas in my country the idea's to hide it from the student so that they should be resourceful and find it for themselves. It's more obstructive, where as here it's more, really supportive. (Aneka, Serbian, TI)

This student also believed that student failure rather than success was one of the aims of her country's educational system. The opposite feeling was commented on with regard to the OU, with this Italian student viewing the OU system as one set up to help students succeed, whereas his previous experience had been with a system that appeared to encourage failure:

... you have all the times throughout the high school and then in the University, ... this feeling that the professors, the tutors, are

mainly there to judge you, and to fail you if they can. (Alberto, Italian graduate, TI)

The other strand of this study addressed my third research question: *How do CE ALs respond to the cultural diversity of their tutor groups?* It is only natural that international students should, at least initially, constantly compare their OU educational experiences with what they have experienced at home. In a similar vein teachers are likely, in varying degrees, to believe that their own educational philosophies and methods are 'right'. This ethnocentrism can be damaging and cause both students and teachers to be blinkered (Burnard 2005). Burnard suggests that a starting point in overcoming this might be a recognition of our own and others' tendencies towards being ethnocentric, something which this study has shown the CE ALs interviewed were at pains to acknowledge and overcome. All the ALs interviewed were skilled distance teaching practitioners but these skills may not always be valued, with Lentell (1994) suggesting that practitioner knowledge is transitory knowledge and that in HE it is academic knowledge that is valued and given status.

AL awareness of different cultural assumptions of HE

Gundara (2000:124) suggests that international students bring with them '*varying cultural endowments*', which will sometimes result in them interpreting tasks such as assignments in unfamiliar ways, something that CE tutors are well aware of. The interviews illustrated how ALs responded to the cultural diversity of their tutor groups in many ways. With respect to feedback, as would be expected, the ALs felt that there were a complex series of interrelated factors that determined the type and content of the feedback they provided. Broadly speaking ALs indicated that their

main thoughts when compiling feedback were centred on the student's performance on the assignment but they also indicated that their knowledge of the student's cultural background and/or level and experience of HE were highly influential in guiding the type of feedback given. Entwined therefore with a tutor's academic response to a piece of work was the tutor's knowledge of the student's culture, country of residence and previous educational system.

Although CE ALs were at pains not to be ethnocentric, it is very difficult to step outside of one's experiences and to be aware that one's own cultural way of doing things is not universal. An example raised during the interviews was the use of ticks (✓). Individuals experienced in an Anglo-Saxon culture take the use and significance of this symbol for granted, it takes a comment from a student, '*what does that sign you've put on my TMA mean?*' to bring home the fact that ticks are not universal. Italians for example, do not use the symbol and do not have a word for it in their language. An ethnocentric view may unknowingly cause ALs to believe the Anglo-Saxon model that they are so familiar with, is the same model that is used throughout Europe, which could lead to false beliefs in many areas.

It was difficult to separately tease out the influence of culture and previous academic experience as they are so closely interrelated. Areas such as ways of studying, essay writing styles and interaction with course materials were highlighted by tutors as being considerably influenced by these two factors. For example, two of the tutors based in Italy felt that there was a sharp contrast between the Italian and British HE systems; students' attitudes towards studying and the way the students interacted with the course material. Both tutors felt that Italians were less questioning in their approach and not happy unless they felt that they had been able to demonstrate the

large amount of material/facts that they had learnt. This may reflect the approach to learning that is prevalent throughout the Italian school and HE system, where students are subject to frequent '*verifica*' (tests) that are designed to test their knowledge, rather than understanding, of course material. ALs based in Italy, France and Germany provided evidence to substantiate many of the points covered in Chapter Two, for example the AL based in France commented that sometimes French students can write in a 'waffly' way, which can be linked with points raised by both Galtung (1981) and Siepmann (2006) concerning the French style of academic discourse (p.41).

Guidance on how to use feedback

Weaver (2006) reports that a large proportion of students enter university claiming never to have received any guidance on using feedback and that this situation was also replicated while at university. This combined with Burke's research (2008) which revealed that academics presume that students know what to do with feedback, sheds light on why students may have problems in learning from feedback. Burke concluded that teachers need to help students develop strategies to understand and use the written feedback they receive on their work.

The AL interviews indicated that in general tutors seemed to consider that once they had sent their feedback to the student their role in the feedback process largely ceased. Only one AL actively communicated with her students about how they might use the feedback in their learning. This tutor was also the only AL who actively talked to her students about the emotions involved in receiving feedback. Varlander (2008) suggests that tutors could share their own personal experiences of feedback with students, for example, how they perceive and handle a peer review feedback of a

research article. She proposes that showing students the various positive and negative emotions that are closely related to learning can make the role of emotions more 'legitimate'.

The fact that all of the ALs had also been OU students themselves and had commented on how being on the receiving end of feedback had helped them in their tutoring makes this finding surprising. Conversely it fits with the tutors being members of individualist societies where individuals are expected to learn how to learn and to initiate dialogues if needed (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005).

This feeling that feedback ceases to be the responsibility of the tutor once it had been sent to the student was reinforced by the fact that most tutors did not seem to know what their students did with their feedback. They tended to rely on seeing an improvement in subsequent TMAs to verify that the feedback had been attended to, believing that if they saw mistakes repeated then this was an indication that the feedback had not been attended to. However, this may not be correct, it may rather be an indication that students need guidance in how to actually use the feedback.

ALs as insiders

This study has spot-lighted the unique skills and experiences that CE ALs bring to their teaching. The CE ALs interviewed were 'insiders' in many ways and this helped them empathise with their students, something that they felt UK based OU staff could not do, as in the words of one tutor '*they [UK academics] don't have a very clear view of what foreign students might be experiencing*'. The benefits of being an expatriate AL were raised in many areas such as the recognition of 'false friends' in students writing and with sensitizing tutors to errors that students might make in

assignments i.e. basing their answers on the diverse Italian accounting system. All the ALs had also been OU students themselves and they reflected that this experience had helped them enormously in developing both the form/structure and content of their feedback.

Other issues

Although the focus of this research was feedback, during the interviews students often spoke in general terms about their experience as OU CE students. Several important issues were raised, which while not strictly related to the research questions, impinged upon students' learning experiences with the university.

CE students 'on the fringes' of the OU

Not all students had unequivocally positive experiences with the OU, certain areas were highlighted for improvement or as negative aspects of their experience, fitting with what Shipley (2001:18) found in his survey where he identified that *'CWE students feel strongly that the service to them is less effective than for UK students'*. Manning (2004) suggests that with respect to campus based universities it could be argued that 'overseas students' choose enrol at a UK university and there is consequently less obligation on the part of the university to adapt its courses, but with respect to the OU it is promoting its courses 'overseas' and so students might well have expectations that these courses would be relevant to their needs, as reflected in this student's observation: *'as the OU courses are being, in inverted commas, 'sold' in Italy and other European countries then there should be a bit more help in terms of course recognition here.'*

In the past, both in UK universities and the OU, it appeared that international students were expected to 'fit-in' to the British system with very little attention being given to their problems. Financial considerations and policy issues, such as PMI 1&2, have contributed to an attitude change in campus universities, with international students now being seen as valued consumers. Unfortunately, comments from both students and ALs seem to indicate that the OU may be lagging behind in this area. A serious point mentioned by several CE students was the perceived lack of interest on the part of the university in the accreditation problems of CE students. Several students felt that despite the Bologna declaration, the university was not interested in any problems they might be experiencing in their home country: *'it's a bit annoying, if I'd known that from the start [about accreditation] maybe I wouldn't have been so ready to study with the Open University.'*

While students generally praised their tutor's cultural awareness and the efforts made by them to anticipate, and overcome any potential 'Anglo-Saxon' stumbling blocks, there was not always a similar feeling with respect to the OU as an institution. Several students commented on the perception they had that there was a 'UK /continental divide', with CE students feeling *'on the fringes'* of the university, receiving *'a slightly second rate service'*. Some of this rancour may have been due to the misplaced perception that UK students have a 'better deal' than CE students, for example that all UK students attend frequent, conveniently sited tutorials, day schools and revision weekends. The high fees paid by European students and *'lack of value for money'* was also often a topic of discontent, with students believing that CE students were *'subsidising the UK side of it.'* Many students criticised the increased fee that European students pay, seeming to feel that the university was willing to take their money, but not to ensure that they got a *'good deal'*. It is not

only students who feel this way, Spendiff (1998:8) surveyed both ALs and students in CE and quoted ALs as also having this perception: *'a nationalistic feeling that it is doing a favour to the foreigners who want a British degree'* and *'The OU's insular UK-centric approach is irritating. It needs to realise overseas students are not a ball and chain around its leg'*. The ALs in this investigation also echoed these feeling when talking about Anglo-centric course materials and the feeling that academics at the OU's central campus in Milton Keynes were unaware of the specific difficulties encountered in CE, for example in commenting on marking guidelines one AL maintained that *'there's no idea that anyone might not be mother tongue English.'*

Reflections on effective feedback

In this final section of the chapter I would like to critically reflect, in the light of my findings, on what these findings indicate is effective feedback for OU students. I will also consider if this is the same for NNEs and NESs, or whether any alterations or additions are required. I will also relate these observations to the OU's espoused approach to feedback.

According to Nicol and McFarlane-Dick (2006) one of the most influential papers underpinning research on effective feedback is that of Sadler (1989). Sadler identified three conditions necessary for feedback to be effective. He proposed that students must know:

- *What good performance is (i.e. must possess a concept of the goal or standard being aimed for);*
- *How current performance relates to good performance (for this, students must be able to compare current and good performance);*
- *How to act to close the gap between current and good performance.*

(Sadler (1989) as cited in Nicol and McFarlane-Dick 2006:204)

The findings of this investigation support both these conditions and many of the published guidelines on giving effective feedback (see Ryan 2000; Carrol 2005; Carrol and Appleton 2007), for example all students appreciated feedback that was prompt, fed forward and highlighted strengths and weaknesses. Many guidelines devote considerable space to advising tutors on how to comment on the content of assignments. Many of the students interviewed in this investigation, however, although appreciating a tutor's content focused comments, especially in explaining grading decisions, stated that the feedback most appreciated, and used more actively was that which focused on the way they had tackled their assignments. Process-based feedback though, cannot be divorced from content-based feedback, and for feedback to be effective both types are needed. In the light of these findings therefore, ALs may find that linking content and process feedback more closely may lead to more effective learning.

In general when comparing NESs and NNESs there was considerable of overlap in what each group viewed as effective feedback. There were also some areas where NNESs had additional or slightly diverse needs and the findings indicate that ALs may need to adjust both the content and the format of the feedback they provide for these students. A key aspect that ALs need to consider is whether their feedback presumes insider knowledge of the Anglo-Saxon HE game. Comments like *'Well done, your coursework average now means you're in line for a first'*, may mean nothing to a NNES coming from a educational system in which final degrees are classified differently. The use of symbols such as ticks to indicate correctness or agreement and '□□' to indicate an omission, may also be culturally bounded. Findings from this study do not indicate that ALs should cease to use these symbols

and ways of giving feedback, but that they may need to be direct and explain their use and significance to NNEs at the beginning of their courses.

Effective feedback is also feedback that helps students to become insiders in their chosen discipline (Chanock 2000). The feedback though, must be understood by students and ALs should ensure that their feedback is not so '*deeply coded*' that it is inaccessible (Sadler 1989:121). This, for example, may involve ALs ensuring that they do not use any 'academic speak' that students are not privy to, for example comments like '*Critical analysis missing*' or '*you cannot use the word 'prove' in discussing the results of a t-test*', may imply insider knowledge. With regard to NNEs, attention to the language of feedback may encompass a larger area. The use of idioms and phrasal verbs such as in '*your introduction was spot on*', or '*your conclusion hit the nail on the head*', can add to the decoding strain of students who are already reading their feedback, in what to them, is a foreign language.

Tutors do not only have to consider what the content of effective feedback is, they also have to consider the format of their feedback. This investigation has highlighted how the OU's favoured 'sandwich' approach to feedback might be misinterpreted, particularly by NNEs students (see p142). In essence the sandwich approach involves beginning the feedback with positive comments on the strong points of the assignment, indicating achievements, emphasizing and building upon the strengths. This is then followed by constructive criticism, giving examples of weaknesses and how to overcome them before finally rounding the comments off on a high note with encouragement for future (McDonnell and Wood 2005). A variation of this (the 'open sandwich') may also be used, when something vital needs to be communicated to a student immediately, and as a consequence starting off with words of praise

rather than piece of information could seem unconvincing or even patronizing (McDonnell and Wood 2005). Hedging, embedded criticism, breaking bad news gently, may all be issues that cloud the effectiveness of feedback for NNEs. The issue however, is a difficult one for ALs to address, both the survey and the interviews showed that students appreciate positive feedback, but that providing this through the 'sandwich' format may not always be understood or appreciated. Considering the pressure and time constraints placed upon ALs in commenting on assignments, it would probably not be possible for them radically change their feedback style and in addition this study has indicated that there is not really one typical 'NNE style' of feedback that is ideal, what may be a more realistic goal is for ALs to become more aware of how hedging and other typical devices used to soften criticism may be misinterpreted, so that they can be both judicious in their use, and perhaps provide tutorial advice or handouts explaining the pedagogic reasoning behind the OU style of feedback.

Effective feedback is also feedback that students know how to use. This research has confirmed that tutors cannot take it for granted that any students (and especially NNEs, who may have had little or no previous experience in receiving feedback), know how to use feedback effectively. All students needed proactive advice on how to use the feedback they receive, in addition, as these findings have indicated the reluctance students may exhibit in contacting ALs to clarify feedback, explicit permission for this needs to be given.

This study has also shown how exemplars can be used as a part of effective feedback. Exemplars were appreciated by both NESs and NNEs, and although used in slightly different ways by each group, their usefulness was acknowledged by the majority of

students questioned, therefore their use should be encouraged as part of effective feedback.

Having considered what this study indicates is effective feedback from the students perspective, I would now like to consider how this maps onto the approach to feedback espoused by the OU. The OU provides a good deal of advice and materials for ALs on how best to provide feedback through a variety of (mostly on-line) sources. The two most consulted sources probably being the SOL reader (Atkins et al 2002) and McDonnell and Wood's (2004) 'Toolkit' for ALs on 'Correspondence Tuition'. These publications contain recommended guidance for ALs on both the form and content of their feedback. Generally, all the points expounded upon in these publications were supported by students in this investigation.

With respect to the format of feedback, as mentioned previously the well known 'sandwich' approach has been vigorously promoted within the OU. This Sandwich approach to giving feedback is also widely advocated in many other fields (see Glover 2001; Yorke 2001; Cantillon and Sargeant 2008; Petty 2009). The unconditional use of the sandwich style of feedback however has been questioned by several authors, most notably by Scott and Coate (2006), who suggest that the recommendation that tutor's feedback should conform to the feedback sandwich model hides the complexities of feedback interpretation. Scott and Coate (2006:97) interviewed both the 'givers' and 'receivers' of feedback and give a specific example of this type of feedback, that while boosting a student's confidence (a purpose advocated by the feedback sandwich), left the student with misperceptions which were *'likely to put her at a disadvantage further on in the course'*. Scott and Coate

(2006:96) also propose that the sandwich format is more suited to the '*authority with kindness*' approach, which they suggest was frequently used in the past in HE when there were fewer mature students. Petty (2009) also suggests that while many givers of feedback find the sandwich approach 'comfortable', as it is an easy discussion opener and can avoid '*tough feedback discussions*' it is in fact 'bad practice' as it can act as a '*crutch that is solely for the benefit of the giver, not the receiver.*' Among his reasons for this strong opinion are his view that the sandwich approach can cause confusion by diluting the key message of the feedback and that by linking positive feedback to negative feedback, the value of the positive feedback is actually destroyed.

As discussed on p.109, the sandwich format of giving feedback appeared to be more familiar to NESs than NNEs, and may possibly have led to some confusion and/or misinterpretation among NNEs. In fact McDonnell and Wood (2004:28) do caution that presenting feedback using this approach may at times present dual messages that can be confusing to students e.g. '*This is correct (first message) but it is not relevant (second message)*', and as outlined previously the findings of this study do indicate that without prior explanation of the rationale this format may not always be the most suitable one for giving feedback to NNEs.

Staff development materials counsel that ALs should be aware of, and cater for the affective aspects of learning, pointing out that part of the skill of writing effective feedback is learning how to say difficult things in a friendly and supportive way, without demoralizing and demotivating the student (Atkins et al 2002). In the UK however a backlash against seeing students as 'fragile learners' who cannot cope with negative feedback is beginning to develop (see Ecclestone 2004; Ecclestone and

Hayes 2009). Comments from the students interviewed for this research do indicate that students who have come through a non-Anglo-Saxon educational system may be more robust than tutors may believe them to be, and consequently tutors should be aware that too much emotional support may be seen as patronizing, a valid point also for NESs, in the light of research mentioned above.

A key aspect of OU pedagogic philosophy is that via their role as facilitators ALs, should in their feedback, encourage learners to be active and responsible participants in constructing their learning, in particular by encouraging learners to reflect and to take increasing control over their learning processes (Atkins et al 2002). Comments from the NNEs students interviewed for this investigation suggest that while this approach is appreciated and welcomed, it may be a novel one and that the OU and ALs may need to consider how students not used to this approach but a more didactical one, can 'eased into' the OUs system.

In conclusion, in any educational philosophy or pedagogic approach there must be room for flexibility and for practitioners to adapt and modify their practice with the aim of doing their best for their students. With respect to feedback both the 'givers' and the 'receivers' need to enter into dialogues so that the good practice that has accumulated within the OU can be used to maximize the learning potential of the students.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the findings from both the survey and the interviews, and how they may link to the theory and research presented in Chapter Two. The data confirmed that there were differences in the way NESs and NNEs reacted to, and

learnt from assignment feedback. The reasons for these differences were not completely clear as many interrelated factors were revealed that impinge upon one another. All students whether or not they are NESs come to their OU studies with a different personal and educational history; a different set of inherent characteristics (personality variables, cognitive ability, learning style, etc), all of which impinge on their response to feedback. The findings supported the supposition that NNEs may not be totally cognisant with the 'rules of the Anglo-Saxon feedback game' and hence may not fully comprehend the often subtle messages contained within feedback. The findings also revealed the importance of factors such as culture and previous academic experience. Each national system of HE has distinctive features and differences in pedagogical approach used, so it was not surprising that the international students interviewed had very different prior educational experiences, a key one being that the vast majority had never before experienced the detailed feedback provided by the OU.

A parallel thread of the study looked at how ALs responded to the cultural diversity of their students when crafting their feedback. The data revealed that ALs tried to avoid making cultural generalizations preferring to see each student as an individual in their own right. Although ALs' main focus when compiling feedback was centred on the student's response to the assignment, their knowledge of the students' cultural and educational background was highly influential in guiding the type of feedback given.

The following chapter will reflect on my experience of conducting this study from the viewpoint of a reflective practitioner, I look back over the study and consider both how with hindsight I might have changed or revised the research processes and

how aspects of my practice have changed. In sharing how the findings from this study have influenced me, I hope other practitioners within the OU and beyond will benefit. The chapter will also consider areas that might be researched further.

Chapter 7 - Reflection and Conclusion

Introduction

In outlining my research questions in Chapter One I indicated that I wished to explore how CE students learn from their assignment feedback, and if UK and CE students react, interact and learn differently from feedback, and if they did, what were the possible reasons for this. This study, though, did not just focus on the receivers of feedback, my third research question investigated the perceptions of my fellow CE ALs - the 'givers' of this feedback, and how they respond to the cultural diversity of their groups. The study confirmed my supposition that NESs and NNESs interact and learn differently from feedback. Although I found that virtually no NNESs had experienced OU style written feedback before, it did not take students long to adapt to receiving feedback and become avid supporters of it.

In this study I discovered that there were many small differences between NES and NNES students that subtly impinged upon the way they learnt from feedback. The root of these differences appears to lie in the different cultural and academic traditions which the students had experienced. Within the data, examples were seen of how students from different ends of Hofstede's (1980, 1983) cultural dimensions reacted differently to their feedback. Indivisibly entwined with this were differences in academic traditions, such as examination practices and teacher-student relationships. Proficiency in the English language also played a part, but the issue was not as transparent as a pure EAL problem. Students did have problems with the feedback language used by ALs, not so much with vocabulary or idiomatic expressions but more with subtle issues, such as the Anglo-Saxon penchant for using hedging devices to disguise criticism or the OU sandwich approach to structuring

feedback. The collective knowledge of the ALs interviewed was great and showed a deep awareness of many of the factors that impinge upon student interaction with feedback. Individual ALs, however, felt somewhat isolated and lacked a real forum for dissipating the knowledge and good practice they had accumulated.

In this chapter I reflect on my experience of conducting this study from the viewpoint of a reflective practitioner, I look back over the study and suggest how aspects of it could have been done differently. In this chapter I also consider its relevance for practice and policy. Finally, I suggest areas for further research.

Reflections on the research process

It was only as I began to analyse the telephone interviews that I truly realised how diverse the educational systems in CE were, and how little I knew about them. Whilst I have been able to draw some broad conclusions, NNEs are not a homogenous group and responses to both survey and interview questions indicate how influential individual culture and pedagogic practice are in shaping the way students respond to assignments and the feedback they receive. Although there have been times during the past three years when I had wished I had focused only on Italy, as the range of cultural and educational influences would have been narrower, my findings then would have had much less applicability within the OU, especially as many CE ALs inform me that their tutor groups are increasingly multi-national.

Interviews with CE ALs allowed me to investigate the other half of the feedback partnership and I was able to discover how this dedicated group of professionals are continually adapting their teaching to cater for students who are unfamiliar with the rules of the Anglo-Saxon HE game. With hindsight however, I feel that an important

group were missing from my interviews – UK ALs tutoring CE students. Had I interviewed UK ALs I would have been in a better position to comment on the wider AL awareness of the effect of differing cultural and academic traditions on NNES students.

No research is perfect, in retrospect I can see I have grown in skills and abilities and if I were able to repeat the study there are several things I might have done differently. Chapter Four (p.84) explains changes I would have made to the survey questionnaire if I could have repeated the survey. As is natural after every interview I reflected on what the interviewee said, and the increase in my knowledge base was reflected in slight shifts in the probes I used in subsequent interviews. If it had not been for restrictions in time and costs I would have liked to have re-interviewed some of the first interviewees, to probe areas that subsequent interviewees or my continued reading had highlighted as being significant.

Due to the nature of the study all interviewees were volunteers. Despite my bearing the cost of phone calls, and interviewees being pre-informed as to the content and time involved, my sample may have been biased. In particular only NNEs who were confident and comfortable in being interviewed in English may have volunteered. With respect to my ex-students I solicited volunteers to be interviewed via the survey questionnaire sent out in 2007, although I had an 86% return rate, this eliminated as potential interviewees, any non-respondents. Slightly fewer NNEs than NESs, (73% vs. 86%), agreed to be interviewed. These factors may have led to a biased interview sample. Non-responders might have been dissatisfied with feedback and consequently, I only interviewed those who had strong positive opinions. Due to the power imbalance some students may have felt inhibited, but

while the interview transcripts did show a predisposition towards positive commenting on my tutoring, students were not afraid to be critical. I am also aware, (from telephone tutorials), that not all students have a landline and there may have been a bias towards those who had more 'fixed' residence in a country and hence access to a landline.

'We can know more than we can tell' (Prusak 1997:136) has considerable bearing on this research, there is always the possibility that interviewees withhold information. Considering the research topic I felt it unlikely that NESs would 'know more than they were willing to tell', but with respect to NNEs this was another matter. Limitations of language ability may not have allowed students to express all the concepts they desired. Although pre-warned of interview topics, it is still more difficult for NNEs than NESs to 'think on their feet'. I contemplated conducting interviews with Italian speakers in Italian, but a reversal of roles would then have occurred and I do not believe I would have been able ask the same range of questions nor to have understood the subtleties of the answers. I believe students were frank in their replies to my questions, but the issue of power may have censored some replies. Despite no longer being the students' tutor I am still an OU AL and inherent in this is the power invested in 'academics' in many European countries.

Relevance to practice and recommendations

As a reflective practitioner (Schön 1983) I have been mulling over the data collected and analyses performed, in order to improve my practice as an AL. Adjustments have ranged from the specifics of explaining what a tick means at the beginning of a course to changes that have permeated my whole philosophy of teaching – I now enter into my tutoring with a strong 'don't presume' attitude. With respect to ticks,

after discovering that the symbol was not a universal one I pondered about refraining from using them but after discussing this with interviewees I appreciated that, once they understood a tick's significance, students seemed to like the 'instant satisfaction' they gave. I have however, become more circumspect in ensuring that ticks are reinforced by comments. I have also reviewed the way I make comments, endeavouring to make them more personal (Pitts 2005). I am now more likely to write: *'I'm having problems following what you mean here'*, rather than: *'this doesn't make sense.'* I am also less reticent in commenting about what I enjoyed in an assignment and more forthcoming about acknowledging any difficulties students may have had.

I, in common with those interviewed by Weaver (2006), did not use to give much thought to how exactly my students learned from their feedback, presuming probably that it occurred by osmosis. I now begin each course by discussing feedback, the emotions feedback can engender and how students can best learn from the feedback they receive.

I have indicated how this study has impinged upon my own practice, but what of the practice of others? This research confirmed that CE ALs are aware of the cultural differences between students and how this can impinge on their learning. R09 staff development events and the OU-EAL Special interest group have heightened this awareness but only amongst a select group of ALs. OU UK tutor groups and classes within campus based universities are becoming increasingly diverse; as my AL colleagues and fellow HE tutors find themselves teaching in an increasingly multicultural environment the wealth of knowledge concerning teaching and tutoring NNES students held by CE ALs needs to be more widely shared.

My findings have shown that the priority of some students studying with the OU is the improvement or maintenance of their English, rather than subject knowledge, and as a consequence this affects the type of feedback they find most useful. In many cases when marking the work of NNEs, there is a fine line between what is solely a matter of English language correction and what is commenting on academic discourse, and so there is a blurring of the issue of language correction. Students must not be misled into believing that the primary aim of OU courses is to improve their English language skills. This issue needs to be addressed from several angles. The OU should continue to make clear statements in its publicity material that it is not a language school; ALs need to continue to reinforce this in their introductory letters to students and course teams (CTs) need to clarify, and give guidance on the extent to which it is practicable or necessary for ALs to focus on English language corrections.

Although distanced from the actual feedback given, CTs have tremendous influence on it, as it is they who design the assessment strategies and assignment questions, and so are directly responsible for what ALs give feedback on. CTs consequently need to be fully aware of the feedback contexts they are creating and to both support ALs, and give them flexibility in the marking guidelines they produce. Data from the AL interviews indicated that CTs do not acknowledge that students from non-Anglo-Saxon background may require special consideration in their 'Tutor Guides', for example by providing guidelines concerning language corrections or directing ALs towards Anglo-centric course materials. ALs commented that CTs are removing some Anglo-centric materials and references from courses as they are rewritten, but if the OU wishes to compete with the myriad of DL providers that are now available it

should pay close attention to becoming more ‘international’ and less Anglo-centric in its focus.

As my findings have shown that many students are ill prepared to learn from feedback because they lack the understanding necessary to accurately interpret academic discourse, I believe that students need more guidance on how to use the feedback they receive. This study revealed that many ALs seemed to see their part in the feedback process as largely ending when they upload their feedback to the eTMA system. Possibly because they believe that students are experienced in learning from feedback and know what to do with it, or from the misguided belief that students would contact them if they did not understand what was written. This study suggests that tutors need to pay more attention to helping students interpret and learn from feedback, and to be proactive in this area, perhaps by dealing with this issue in initial tutorials or by materials attached to the first piece of feedback given. NNEs are doubly disadvantaged by their lack of knowledge of the ‘rules of the feedback game’ and their need to comprehend the often subtle messages contained within feedback, areas that need to be specifically addressed by ALs.

During interviews, a point frequently raised by students was their desire for ‘feedback dialogues’ with tutors. The effectiveness of feedback and the probability that it is understood increases if feedback is conceptualised more as a dialogue (Varlander 2008). Although the OU espouses a dialogue between tutor and students during the giving of feedback (Atkins et al. 2002) this does not seem to happen in any real sense. What students requested was an actual two-way verbal communication on the comments received. Assessment dialogues would help students clarify ‘the rules of the game’, the assumptions known to lecturers but less transparent to students,

perhaps because they are couched in their own academic discourse. To put this into practice however, would have university wide ramifications, even a ten-minute discussion per student would involve the average AL in an extra 26 hours per 60-point course, with a consequent increase in costs for the university. If funding could be found for this, and tutors did enter into feedback dialogues with students, ALs would probably need to be proactive and give students 'permission to question', as cultural and power differentials can inhibit students from making the first move.

It is not only students who require help, teachers also require assistance maximizing the usefulness of their feedback (Ecclestone and Swann 1999; Hartley and Chesworth 2000). Some of the ALs interviewed mentioned that the OU produced guidelines concerning good practice but they felt that there was little opportunity within the OU for them to actively share and learn from each others' good practice. For example, only monitors see the written feedback comments that other ALs make. Academic literature and findings from this study have shown how useful exemplars are, and I believe that sharing good practice in this area, either through staff development opportunities or AL forums, would assist not only CE ALs but also UK ALs. Costs may preclude the university from frequently inviting CE ALs to meetings and staff development events but wikis and blogs could be used to share knowledge in a 'virtual' way.

Data from this study has also shown how my ex-students welcomed and used exemplars. Comments from NNES students whom I had not tutored indicated that they also, would welcome exemplars. The use of exemplars may help to clarify the rules of the Anglo-Saxon HE game for NNESs but as mentioned on p.149 exemplars need to be used judiciously as students did not always understand what the exemplar

is a good example of. It might therefore be more constructive to use selected aspects of assignments, rather than whole assignments and to provide an accompanying commentary.

This study has revealed that many of the students interviewed felt neglected by the OU as an institution. Positive comments were made about tutors, country coordinators and course materials, but the central campus in Milton Keynes received criticism. Student comments indicated that when contacting the OU they often encountered administrative personnel who appeared to have little knowledge, or interest in, the unique CE perspective. CE students pay 140% more than UK students and many felt they were 'not getting their money's worth', especially as OU degrees are not recognised in many European countries (Bennison 2004). CE students make financial and emotional commitments to their studies and this research indicates that the OU needs to respond to this by ensuring that they have dedicated administrative personnel experienced in dealing with enquiries from non-UK based students. In a review of OU provision in CWE Shipley (2001:1) wrote '*Students in CWE are seen as an extension to the UK rather than as a special overseas scheme*', I would suggest that if the university does not want to lose potential 'customers' then it needs to revise this attitude and to continue to work on ensuring that OU degrees are recognised through out Europe.

Further areas I would like to investigate

As a reflective practitioner one of the most revealing aspects of this study was the often subtle misinterpretation by NNEs of Anglo-Saxon academic and feedback discourse. For example, how much the 'hedging' of criticism so favoured by Anglo-Saxon teachers prevents NNEs from interpreting feedback clearly. In Chapter

Three (pp.51-2) I discussed my consideration of 'think-aloud protocols' as a method for investigating this area in depth. If logistical and financial obstacles could be overcome, I would like to ask students to 'think aloud' their thoughts and feelings the moment they first read their assignment feedback, as I believe this would be very fruitful in revealing in more detail the way students interpret their feedback.

Throughout this study the ALs interviewed gave examples of how their 'insider' knowledge had assisted them in understanding the unique cultural perspective of their students. Recently the number of CE ALs has fallen, one reason for this being the nonrenewal of AL contracts in France and Italy due to the non-compliance of OU contracts with the labour laws in these countries. This study has shown not only the care and commitment demonstrated by CE ALs but also their value as a resource for the OU. I believe that in many ways the OU has a very minimalistic view of tutors, in that ALs are '*largely seen as technicians applying competencies they have been trained to perform*' (Lentell 1994:51). It takes an experienced tutor, familiar with a particular culture to understand the root of some students difficulties. Manning (2004:12) acknowledges this when she writes '*luckily, the very fact that these tutors are likely to be resident in a particular country means that they may be more sensitive to cultural differences than their UK counterparts.*' ALs are insiders in the countries in which they tutor and have developed considerable expertise in supporting students from different academic traditions, further research is need to discover how best this knowledge can be tapped and shared among all levels of OU colleagues. I would like to investigate this area further, to highlight why the OU should capitalise on CE ALs rather than make them redundant.

Conclusion

The ODL market in Europe is highly competitive, being fuelled '*by rising demand, increasing supply from both EU and extra-EU providers, and by initiatives taken in almost all EU countries to develop on-line learning provision*' (Shipley 2001:38). At one stage the UK, being the main inner circle English speaking country in Europe might have felt secure as the only provider of courses in this language, but countries such as Finland and Denmark have also developed on-line courses in English. The British Council (2005) has predicted that the demand for transnational education will continue to grow and the OU and other campus/distance universities are continually searching for new international markets for their courses. International students are valuable but discerning 'customers'. PMI2 targets include '*ensuring international students have a positive UK experience and achieving improvements in student satisfaction ratings*' (British Council 2006), I hope the findings from this study will contribute in some small way to increasing the knowledge base in this area.

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Appendices

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Appendix 1 – Demographic Details of Students Interviewed

Pseudonym	Nationality	Country of Residence	Native language	Educational background	Number of OU courses studied	Ex-student of mine?
Maria	Italian	Italy	Italian	Graduate	1	Yes
Brigitte	Luxemburgish	Luxembourg	French /German	Graduate	2	Yes
Iskra	Bulgarian	Spain	Bulgarian	School leaver	3	Yes
Aneka	Serbian	The Netherlands	Serbian	Incomplete university	1	Yes
Caterina	Austrian	Austria	German	Graduate	2	No
Una	German	Switzerland	German	Diploma	3	No
Helga	Austrian	Austria	German	A levels	3	No
Alberto	Italian	Italy	Italian	Graduate	1	Yes
Herman	German	Germany	German	Graduate	6	No
Leon	Brazilian	The Netherlands	Portuguese	Postgraduate	1	Yes
Tabor	Hungarian	Hungary	Hungarian	Graduate	1	No
Karen	Swiss	Switzerland	German	School leaver	3	No
Christine	British/Danish	Spain	English /Danish	Incomplete university	4	Yes
Angela	Australian	Italy	English	Graduate	3	Yes
Lucy	British	Netherlands	English	PhD	1	Yes
Barbara	British	Italy	English	Graduate	3	Yes
Leanne	British	Spain	English	Diploma	1	No
Patrick	British	Italy	English	Graduate	1	Yes
Simon	British	Spain	English	Graduate	3	Yes
David	Ghanaian	Italy	English	Graduate	8	No

Appendix 2 - Demographic Details of ALs Interviewed

Pseudonym	Country of Residence	Faculty	Level of Course(s) Tutored
James	Italy	Arts	Foundation
John	Italy	Social Sciences	Foundation
Paul	Austria	Arts	Foundation
Patricia	Italy	OUBS	Postgraduate
Lesley	Switzerland	Social Sciences	Foundation
Claire	France	Education & Languages	Level 2

Appendix 3 – E-mail Accompanying Survey Questionnaire

Dear

I hope the exam went well for you.

As you might know I'm also an OU student as I'm doing a doctorate in education. I'm looking at ways of improving feedback and whether international students experience the OU in a different way to British students.

I'm hoping to collect both quantitative and qualitative data for my research. The quantitative data through a questionnaire and the qualitative data through a semi-structured telephone interview. I am writing to ask you if you would be willing to fill in the attached questionnaire for me. The questionnaire is aimed both at collecting background information on my students so that I get a better idea of how 'international' they are, and at collecting specific information concerning your use of the feedback I provided on your TMAs.

Please don't feel that you are obliged to fill in the questionnaire. If you do fill it in I will make sure that when I collate and analyse the data that your replies remain anonymous, and that if I use any quotes in my thesis that you can not be identified from them. You are obviously free to answer all the questions, or as many as you wish.

If you are willing to complete the questionnaire I would be grateful if you could return it to me by 14th November.

Best wishes,

Sue

Appendix 4 – Survey Questionnaire

Student Feedback Questionnaire

Please either type in your answer or put a cross 'X' where appropriate.

Nationality, country of residence

1. What is your nationality?

2. Which country are you living in now and how long have you lived there?

.....

3. If this country is not your country of birth, what is the reason(s) for your residence there? (e.g. work commitments, work commitments of spouse/partner, domestic commitments, personal preference)

.....

4. Have you ever lived in any other countries for a substantial period of time (more than 1 year)? Yes No

If yes, which countries and for how long?:

.....

Language

5. What do you regard as your main language(s), i.e. the language(s) you use for everyday living?

.....

6. Is English your 1st/2nd/3rd/4th language or do you consider yourself bilingual in English and another language?

.....

7. If English is not your first language, has this cause you any problems with your studies?

Yes No

If "yes", please indicate which of the following aspects posed the most problems:

- reading and understanding the course materials
- expressing academic ideas in your own words
- communicating with your tutor
- contributing to discussions during tutorials/residential schools
- completing written work within time limits
- other (*please specify*)

.....

.....

Educational background

8. In which country or countries did you attend school/college / university?

.....

9. What was the main language of instruction in this/these establishments?

.....

10. Before you started studying with the Open University what was your highest level of study?

Open University Study

11. Which course are you studying now?

.....

12. Which other OU courses, if any, have you also completed?

.....

Feedback

13. Did you actively look for feedback on your TMAs, i.e. did you check your e-mail for notification that you can collect the marked TMA?

Yes No

If 'no', why was this:

.....
.....

14. Did you read the comments on the PT3?

Yes, read them

Yes, scanned them

No

15. Did you read the comments on the TMA itself?

Yes No

16. Did you download or print the PT3 form and the marked assignment?

No Yes (both) Yes (PT3 only) Yes (TMA only)

17. Did you understand the comments on the PT3s and the assignments?

Yes, always

Yes, mostly

sometimes

A few times

Never

18. From reading the comments did you understand why your assignment received the grade it did?

Yes, always

Yes, mostly

sometimes

A few times

Never

19. Did the feedback give you guidance as to how to improve in the future?

Yes, always

Yes, mostly

sometimes

A few times

Never

20. Did you feel any more confident about tackling your next TMA after receiving the feedback?

Yes, always

Yes, mostly

sometimes

A few times

Never

21. Did you re-read the feedback before completing the next TMA?

Yes, always

Yes, mostly

sometimes

A few times

Never

22. Did you follow up any references made to course materials in the feedback?

Yes, always

Yes, mostly

sometimes

A few times

Never

23. Did you read the example assignments that were sent to you?

Yes, always

Yes, mostly

sometimes

A few times

Never

24. If you did, were you able to understand why they were good examples?

Yes, always

Yes, mostly

sometimes

A few times

Never

Please write as much as you like here:

<p>25. Is there any other TMA feedback that you would have found useful?</p>	
<p>26. If you felt that feedback on one TMA influenced what you did on the next TMA. Could you give some examples of this influence.</p>	
<p>27. If you used the example assignments you were sent, how did you use them? If you didn't find them useful, could you explain why.</p>	

The data I collect from this questionnaire will form part of the background data for my thesis. I am also intending to collect data using semi-structured telephone interviews, if you would be willing to be interviewed please indicate this below. The interview would take place sometime between November and February and be about 30-50 minutes long. I would telephone you and so there would be no cost to you. With your permission, I would record the interview so that I can transcribe it afterwards. I would make sure that that I anonymised your replies and that if I used any material or quotations in my thesis that you couldn't be identified from them.

I would be willing to take part in a telephone interview: yes

No

Once again, thank you very much for taking time to participate in my research.

Best wishes,

Sue

Appendix 5 – Student Telephone Interview Schedule & Probes

Introduction

General chat, how did exam go? Reiterate ethical points – consent, right to withdraw, data destroyed, confidentiality

Warm-up questions

1. How many OU courses have you studied?
2. Are you Italian/Dutch/Spanish ...? If not, how long have you lived in Italy/The Netherlands/Spain ...?
3. Why do you live in Italy/The Netherlands/Spain ...?
4. Is English your native language? If not what is your native language? How well do you speak/read/write English?
5. How did you learn English? (prompt for age, level, etc)
6. For those whose first language is not English: Has your level of English ever caused you difficulties with your OU studies? (probe for details of difficulties)

Previous Educational experience

7. Can you tell me about your previous educational experiences. (Probe if needed for country, language of education, type of school, level)
8. If the student has had prior HE experience: How do you find learning with the OU compares with your previous HE learning experiences? (Probe: assignments, feedback i.e. form, content, influence on learning, relationship with tutor, deadlines, exams)
9. If the student hasn't had any prior HE experience: How does the OU feedback compare to other educational feedback you've received when you were at school? (Probe: form, content, influence on learning)

Studying with the OU

10. Why did you choose to study with the OU?
11. Have you studied with any other DL institutions? If yes what, why, why did you change to the OU

12. Has the experience you've had with the OU so far matched up to your expectations? If no, why not

Feedback

13. Can you take me through what you do when you receive the e-mail to say that I've returned your eTMA? (probe: what looked at first, download, print, etc)

14. How easy is it for you to see the alterations, additions, etc. that I add?

15. How do you usually feel after receiving the feedback?

16. How do you feel about the balance between the script and the PT3 comments?

17. Do you look at the feedback again after you initial reading? (probe: when, what done)

16. What do you think you learn from the feedback? (Probe both for process and content)

17. Did the feedback help you to understand how I arrived at the grade I gave the assignment?

18. In general how do you feel about tackling the next TMA after receiving feedback? Do you think the feedback you receive influences what you do on the next TMA? If yes why? Can you give some examples

19. Can you think of any examples/types of feedback that you found particularly helpful? Why was this?

20. Can you think of any examples/types of feedback that you found particularly unhelpful? Why was this? (probe for meaning, language, concepts)

21. With regard to both script and PT3 feedback what would you like more/less of?

22. I sometimes also sent you examples of high scoring assignments. Did you read them? If yes, were they useful? (Probe for how used) Could you see why they were good examples? If no, why not?

Cultural difference/problems

23. ONLY FOR THOSE WHO ARE NOT BRITISH: Do you feel like a foreign student when you study with the OU? If yes what made you feel

like that? (Probe for academic tradition differences, anglocentricity of materials, different relationship with tutor)

24. Have you experienced any particular problems/difficulties studying with the OU? (Probe intellectual self censorship, language differences)

25. I frequently use 'ticks' when marking assignments. Was this symbol familiar to you? (Probe: yes - what does it mean, when used? No - how did you find out its significance)

Close down

Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your experience of feedback or studying with the OU?

Thank student, reiterate ethical points.

Appendix 6 – AL Telephone Interview Schedule & Probes

Introduction

General chat, Reiterate ethical points - consent, right to withdraw, data destroyed, confidentiality

Demographic Questions

- 1: Length of time as an AL, course(s) tutored, balance of students with regard to nationality/native language/previous HE background; types of TMAs marked (i.e. essays, projects, short answers, multiple choice). Is composition of group changing?
- 2: How do you find out this information about your students?
- 3: Do you know why you students have chosen OU? (probe for how & reasons)

Marking TMAs & giving feedback

- 4: How do you go about marking TMAs? (probe: order, annotations, separate sheet, etc)
- 5: What determines the feedback you give?
- 6: How is your feedback tailored to individual students; how is it structured?
- 7: What influence does a student's nationality/native language/previous educational experience have on the feedback you give? (probe for cultural/pedagogic differences)
- 8: How do you deal with English language problems?
- 9: Do you know what your students generally do with the feedback you provide? Do they contact you to discuss their feedback? What issues do they raise?
- 10: Do you suggest to students how they should use feedback? (probe: when, what, are emotions addressed)
- 11: What do you think your students learn from their TMA feedback? What factors influence this.
- 12: Does your course guide/marking guidelines give you any suggestion about how you should mark the TMAs of non-UK students? If so, what sort of points do they raise?

13: How do you think being an expatriate AL has affected your tutoring? (probe for specific examples).

ALs Previous study with OU

14: Have you studied with the OU? If yes, how have you found the feedback process? (probe for reactions, influence on their feedback practices)

OU in Europe

15: How well do you think the OU's approach to teaching and learning transfers across international boundaries? (probe for things that do/don't transfer, anglocentricity)

Close down

Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your experience as an OU AL in CE or giving feedback?

Thank AL, reiterate ethical points.

Appendix 7 - Covering Letter Prior to Student Interview

Dear Maria,

How are you? I'm glad you felt that the exams went better this year.

Thank you for filling in my questionnaire and agreeing to be interviewed. As you know I'm also an OU student as I'm doing a research doctorate. For my thesis I'm looking at ways of improving feedback and whether international students experience the OU in a different way to British students.

I was wondering if next Monday at 4pm would be OK for the interview? With your permission I'd like to record the interview so that I can transcribe it afterwards. I would make sure that that I anonymised your replies and that if I used any material in my thesis that you couldn't identified from it. As is usual with any research you would be free not to answer any question and to terminate the interview when ever you wanted and to, and to ask for the data collected to be destroyed.

I anticipate that the interview would take about 40 minutes to an hour and I would e-mail you the topics I'd like to cover beforehand.

If you are still in agreement to be interviewed please let me know if next Monday at 4pm is OK for you, if it's not just let me know a time that's suitable for you.

Best wishes,

Sue

Appendix 8 -Covering Letter Prior to AL Interviews

Dear Lesley,

How are you? Are you tutoring at the moment or does your course have an Autumn presentation?

As you might know I'm doing the doctorate in education course with the OU. My thesis is looking at what students in CE actually do with their TMA feedback, how they learn from it and in particular if international students use and learn from feedback in a different way to British students.

Most of the data I collect will be qualitative and I am hoping to carry out telephone interviews both with students and ALs, and I was wondering if I could interview you for this research. If you agreed, I would, with your permission, like to record the interview so that I can transcribe it afterwards. I would obviously make sure that I anonymised your replies if I used any thing you said in my thesis, and I'd eliminate the mp3 file after I had finished with it. As is usual with any research you would be free not to answer any question if you so wished, to terminate the interview when ever you wanted and to ask for the data collected to be destroyed.

I anticipate that the interview would take about 50 minutes to an hour and I would e-mail the topics I'd like to cover to you beforehand.

If you agree to be interviewed please let me know when the best time for me to phone you would be.

Best wishes,

Sue

Appendix 9 – Transcription of Coded Student Interview

Key for codes can be found in Appendix 10

The footnotes are memos I wrote while transcribing and re-reading interview

	Code
<i>Sue: is this the first course you've studied with the open University, this year.</i>	
<i>Alberto: the Open University.</i>	
<i>Sue: yes.</i>	
<i>Alberto: yes well, I did the what's its name, DD100</i>	Cp
<i>Sue:DD100?</i>	
<i>Alberto: DD100 before, yes. And so this one was my second course. Yes with you, now I'm on my third one.</i>	Cp
<i>Sue: are you planning to do another one next year, starting in February.</i>	
<i>Alberto: yes</i>	
<i>Sue: which one?</i>	
<i>Alberto: I'm not sure yet, but my plan is to actually finish this as soon as possible. I'm not planning to take a break, moments like now basically that's why I'm taking the online course, because that's all I can do, I have to wait anyway. The next course in January, I don't know which one it is, basically my plan is to take all of them, as they are offered, without any spaces in between as far as possible. So next year to answer your question, I'm sure will take more than one course.</i>	Cfu
<i>Sue: so your have quite a heavy workload then, next year, if you take more than one. You speak English very well how come? Have you spent a long time learning English. How come.</i>	
<i>Alberto: about my English? Well, thank you first of all but I don't think it's very good. Well, I've been studying, well when I was in high school, during summer I was usually my parents used to send me to the States to do some summer courses, and then I'm basically living and working outside Italy from the last 7, 8 years, and so I work basically in English, and I'm spending a lot of time here in Israel, and here I'm not speaking Hebrew so my daily life is with English again, so I guess that's the reason.</i>	ENGsch ENGwo ENGtr
<i>Sue: so that must have helped with your open University studies, then, you didn't have any problem with the English with the books and things</i>	
<i>Alberto: no, not at all no, also my previous MBA. It's not really an MBA, it's a master in entrepreneurship innovation. I studied here in Tel Aviv with I think it's a branch of an Australian university and also it was completely in English so I didn't have any problem.</i>	HESub HElev
<i>Sue: was that a distance learning course again, the MBA course you did with the Australian university?</i>	
<i>Alberto: yes, that's the first time I'm taking a distance, like I'm going through a distance learning process. My previous two masters degrees where were both attendable</i>	HEodl
<i>Sue: in Italy, Did you go to university in Italy.</i>	
<i>Alberto: yes, my first degree was at Milano university, and it was a degree in the school of biology, in natural science.</i>	HESub
<i>Sue: natural sciences, okay, how does your experience of the open University compare with going to on the site University?</i>	

<p>Alberto: it's it is quite different, but at least so far, it's very positive in the sense that it might sound strange but especially in Italy, and fortunately the first study I did it's not all the time easy for example to have a good tutoring or simply to get in touch with the professor, sometimes it's very difficult, and when you do it their time is usually limited, and so I found myself many, many times, several times, trying to squeeze myself into two minutes break of the professor, and not being able to ask what ever I wanted to ask, so in terms of the relationship and the ongoing collaboration with the professor and the tutor, I had a very positive surprise in the open University, of course, the relationship is a distant relationship and it is mediated by tools like phones e-mails, but it's usually the feedback, the reply is very precise and comes quickly after you've sent you sent out your request, so from this point of view I'm definitely happy about it. In terms of lessons, in terms of lecturing and stuff like that of course it's a different way to study so I don't know what kinda experience open University has with young students with their first degree, I would probably recommend open University to older students¹, in a way that they are able to, first of all they are able to organise themselves much better, but secondly, their motivations are different, supposed to be stronger, so they can overcome some of the downsides of ... for example of not getting to, a class and getting a lecture from from someone.</p>	<p>POU</p> <p>RELcon</p>
<p>Sue: was your experience at the Italian University, did you have things like TMAs, did you have assignments to do during the course or was there only an exam at the end?</p>	
<p>Alberto: very, very rarely, actually, I cannot even recall one, not even one. Basically, you only have the exam at the end, as you probably know the characteristics of the Italian University, but not just the University also high school is on oral exams so all my exams that I did in my university. Basically, it was all the same and first to do the written test and then if you pass the written you go to the oral, chat with the professor and then only after you actually pass the exam. In that case, it was limited to kind of reports ??? in the inner way the TMA is unclear ??? to actually keep the students doing something, reading and studying and researching what they are doing. While usually in Italy you do 90% of the time you are doing studying the course and doing the exam.</p>	<p>HEcw</p> <p>HEex</p> <p>HEcom</p> <p>HEcw</p>
<p>Sue: in the exam, you obviously get a mark at the end of the exam does the professor also give you some feedback on your performance, or do you just get the mark? Does the professor explain what you did well on and what you didn't do so well on?</p>	
<p>Alberto: yes, in the it depends a lot from professor to Professor, because unfortunately the Italian system is full of people there since ages and they basically do whatever they want each professor is on a different planet, but basically, usually, right after the written test you don't get so much, sometimes you just get if you pass it or not. So then you try again, and sometimes you have the opportunity to go to the professors in certain hours and discuss the written tests, other times no, and then sometimes only when you finally pass the test and you get to the oral, you have another chance actually to ask what's wrong. But in my experience, at least with important exams and least in the first years, there are so many people and the professors are so much in stress and working often with several assistants at the same time, that you don't really get the chance to have a proper discussion, you barely understand what you did wrong, what you did right, and then you on to the oral test and then usually you are just looking forward to getting rid of it, get a pass and move on. So the whole system is not really designed for, you know, to give a proper feedback to the students.</p>	<p>HEfb</p> <p>HEex</p> <p>RELcon</p> <p>HEfb</p> <p>RELqu</p> <p>HEfb</p>
<p>Sue: could you take me through what you did when you receive feedback from the open University, when you received the e-mail to tell you that your assignment had been returned. What did you do?</p>	
<p>Alberto: with the feedbacks I got after the TMA? Usually I ... well I ..., especially at the beginning I was quite interested in the feedbacks because it was a completely new system to me², so I was curious on the way our work actually is evaluated and marked. Usually I read it the first time, the minute basically I get it and then but not always, but most of the time, before I, when I was in the middle of the preparations of the next TMA, I was actually reading back the previous feedback that I got on the previous TMA just to see if I</p>	<p>FBrec</p> <p>FBlea</p> <p>FBnxt</p>

¹ Awareness of isolation, of needing support

² newness to the system of receiving feedback

<i>may be forgot something or missed something or I can reformulate the whole thing, but this is something I did only the second time, I did only if I felt comfortable with my time, if I wasn't in a rush. Looking back, probably you not on all TMAs but on some TMAs I should have may be read them more carefully the previous, you know, the previous comments that I got</i>	
<i>Sue: I presume that the first thing you looked at when, when you opened the file was the mark is that correct?</i>	
<i>Alberto: yes, that is correct.</i>	<i>FBfir</i>
<i>Sue: and then did you read the comments on the TMA itself or the comments on the PT3 form first.</i>	
<i>Alberto: first of all, the one I got immediately. I don't know how you call it, the PT3 is the one I got by mail, right? So first I got the other one, via e-mail, so this is the first one I would see, and I would read and then I would I would get the PT3 I would also read it, the PT3 before filing it away.</i>	<i>FBord</i>
<i>Sue: and how did you find the system of embedding the comments within your piece of work. The comments</i>	
<i>Alberto: very good, very good. I like it very well. I like it a lot and I think that first of all it makes a lot of sense and then it's very useful for the student, because it's He can see the comments and the evaluation flowing basically through the text together with what I wrote³. It makes it easier also for us, not only to see exactly but to understand what we could have done better, but also to understand what was your approach to the whole paper</i>	<i>ETic FBval</i>
<i>Sue: I am interested in how all students learn from their feedback, so could you tell me how you built on that feedback to help you move on with your learning to progress with the next TMA?</i>	
<i>Alberto: well, basically, what I do with feedbacks is basically ... it's because I know sometimes I am either weak in something particular or maybe I was aware that I could have done better in one sense or another, but may be for time reason or for work reason I couldn't really put all the effort, you know the time wanted to do, so the first thing is to see if also my impression were, my feelings basically after I finished the paper was also the same actually that were pointed out by the comments on the TMA of course. So the first is this kind of matching between my feelings after I finished and what was finded out by the tutor and sometimes they matched sometimes no, because what I had was just a feeling and then the second thing that I did once, I think after the third or four TMA is to go back from the beginning to see from the first TMA and to see if I was doing something consistently, not use the word wrong, but if I was consistently on the TMA, maybe I was not really aware of something that was going all the time, not just randomly, and that was, I can't remember what was it that I found but I found something that I You know that every time you get a TMA, a PT3 or a TMA with the comments, you read the comments but your mind is already farther away on other comments that you got previously, they might also be very important ??? link to what your right now useful one time. To have a more overall view of all the comments to see where went wrong, I think</i>	<i>FBmat FBlea</i>
<i>Sue: one of the problems with TMAs and the comments is the fact that they are looking backwards.</i>	
<i>Alberto: Maybe, I'm not sure what kind of guidelines</i>	
<i>Sue: Yes, I have a set of guidelines.</i>	
<i>Alberto: sometimes you</i>	
<i>Sue: you said about matching, whether the comments matched up with</i>	

³ Positive aspect of the OU TMA system in that you can see the tutors thoughts as they are marking it

Lost connection	
<i>Sue: My last question to you was you talked about the matching of how you felt about your TMA and the comments you got, were comments that you got generally explicit enough? Did you understand why you got the grades you did?</i>	
<i>Alberto: yes, totally. I think yes, yes, I never found myself wondering about why, I don't understand this, I don't understand that, the comments were usually very clear and as I said before quite often made a lot of sense of what also I felt, so no I never had any problem in understanding comments, not in understanding what you were saying but not even understanding what your point was so it was pretty clear</i>	FBcl FBumar
<i>Sue: were there any other areas that you felt you would have liked comments in?</i>	
<i>Alberto: umm, no no, I didn't think it, personally I was quite pleased with about these comments, as I said, it might be strange, but if I look back at my academic experience, those PT3 comments and feedbacks were, that I got with the TMAs with the Open university were often more precise and, and more complete compared to comments that I got live, you know when I did, when I studied not with a distance learning process programme. So in this sense, there was a big surprise for me and probably this was one of the few doubts that I had before joining the open University, but then at least on this point, I was completely satisfied.</i>	FBgdp HEcom POU
<i>Sue: I sometimes sent example assignments that other people had written, when they'd scored well, did you look at those assignments at all?</i>	
<i>Alberto: Yes, not all the time, but I think the first two for sure, I read it and then I think I read another one, but later on, towards the ..., I think the course was already over and I was putting a bit of order in all the documents and I and so I read another one. And these I think are very useful, probably the students like me or I don't know, other students don't fully understand the potential of reading the work of somebody else, another student, maybe it's something you don't do it, let's say you don't give a high priority to this, because after you did the part and after you got the comments from tutor, like instinctively, like even consciously you think that it's okay, it's probably a good job, but anyway, it's coming from another student. That's a pity actually, we should force ourselves to look at these work in a completely different way. But if you're short of time, let's say this is probably the first one, you just don't do it.</i>	EXposge n EXnu
<i>Sue: okay, you think it is something worth continuing with to send these examples?</i>	
<i>Alberto: You are asking if I'm continuing to study?</i>	
<i>Sue: My sending out these example TMAs is also an experiment on my part, to see if they were useful, so although you didn't always have time to read them, you seem to have thought that they were quite a useful thing, and it would be worth continuing</i>	
<i>Alberto: I lost you gain</i>	
<i>Sue: Let me change track slightly and ask you some other questions. Some people have said that the open University materials are very Anglo centric, focused on very much on the UK did you find that?.</i>	
<i>Alberto: Yes, yes a bit, maybe not a lot in the last course, may be, but in DD100, I found it pretty much Anglo centric, yes, this is not necessarily a bad thing. I mean after all, I'm studying in our English university, university in the UK. So of course it's Anglo centric, so my answer is 'yes', but it's not necessarily something negative also because also if someone like in my case, think, I'm not sure at all but one of the options is to continue my education in psychology within the UK system, then of course you have to be prepared to somehow to be close to the UK system and if you want there your study to be recognized there, and even to move on, if from a professional point of view, that's the basics, that's something you should get any way.</i>	ACmat
<i>Sue: so you're saying that although you found some Anglo centricity in the materials, it wasn't so much that it interfered with your studying.</i>	
<i>Alberto: Yes, not so much</i>	

<i>Sue: what do you think are some of the key differences between the Italian system of higher education and the UK one?</i>	
<i>Alberto: ⁴Of course, first of all I don't know if, if the Open University system, it's basically the usual system that you find in any other UK university. I guess yes, but I'm not sure. The Italian university, but I think ... it is a problem that the whole Italian educational system has is that it is very much focused on, let's say, how to phrase it, it's very much focused on an enormous amount of data that you try to keep in mind, to memorise, on which you will be tested in detail and, and then you have all the times throughout the high school and then in the University, you have all the time this feeling that the professors, the tutors are mainly there to judge you, and to fail you if they can. I'm exaggerating a bit but at least with the open University, I had the feeling that the professor and the whole system was treating the students in a more responsible way, even there the responsibility of the role in education, and of course you can fail, of course, you can't do things like cheating and stuff like that but I had the feeling that the system was treating me more as an adult and that the purpose of the people there was not to fail me or to show me how bad I am because I didn't study, but it was more a sort of collaborative framework. The point was to learn things in the best way, not necessarily by suffering. I don't know if I were able to give you the feeling, may be because again in the Italian system we have this oral part which is ... usually students are afraid, of course, of this oral part because you sit face-to-face with a person and then this person can fail you even if you did a good written parts, and there are people, I remember personally when I did my first degree in Milano a couple of exams I took about a year of trying in order to pass them because the professor was extremely old-fashioned and very hard. So he was expecting a level of preparation that was way outside the purpose of the University. So this, this, I still have, although many years have passed I still have this bad experience, so I was very positive surprised by the system, the UK system, that was by the way confirmed by, I think by other friends of mine, that are studying at other university and a few others in the American University, and both told me that the approach is pretty much ... it's very different from the Italian approach.</i>	<i>HEdifat HEcom RELou RELcon POU Hedifat</i>
<i>Sue: yes, it does seem to be. I gather that the relationship in the Italian University system is much more formal between the student and the professor?</i>	
<i>Alberto: the relationship was extremely, extremely formal, extremely formal that's why all the time you have this wall between you and them and you sometimes are even afraid to knock on the door during the time they are usually receiving students to ask questions and I remember vividly one of my professors just while I was talking just entered to an elevator and press the button and disappeared while I was still talking to him. It's funny but unfortunately it was quite common, and it was really difficult, I'm generalising but that it wasn't an exception, but you have this general feeling of being completely detached and then, and so it's not the best environment to long-term...</i>	<i>RELfor</i>
<i>Sue: the sort of system that is very common in the UK is where you sort of debate with your tutors, debate with your professors and questioned them, so that sort of debating and questioning isn't really a style that is used in the Italian university system?</i>	
<i>Alberto: exactly, you can debate, you can ask questions actually during the lectures, but I never saw a real, maybe I saw something like a debate, but at the Open University I saw an online exchange that were even close to challenging some, it's not really the tutor himself but the ideas of some of the things that he was saying, and in the Italian system you don't get so far as to challenge what the professor is saying because you are risking not to pass the exam for a long time so you just don't do this⁵</i>	<i>RELqu</i>
<i>Sue: you've give me lots of very useful and interesting information. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me either about being an international student with the open University or about feedback and learning?</i>	
<i>Alberto: No, not really about the feedback, about being an international student, personally I think it is very important that they should put it in as a compulsory for any</i>	<i>POU</i>

⁴ detailed example of the differences in academic traditions

⁵ the idea of the power of the professor and the influence of personality and other factors that may impinge upon grade giving rather than just academic ability

<i>university to be to put in as part of your education to have contact with another university, it's really enriching, and it prepares you and it's basically it's the only thing that prepares you to a life and career, you know, done abroad of course if you're interested in this but on my side it's just a plus to be an international not for sure a minus</i>	
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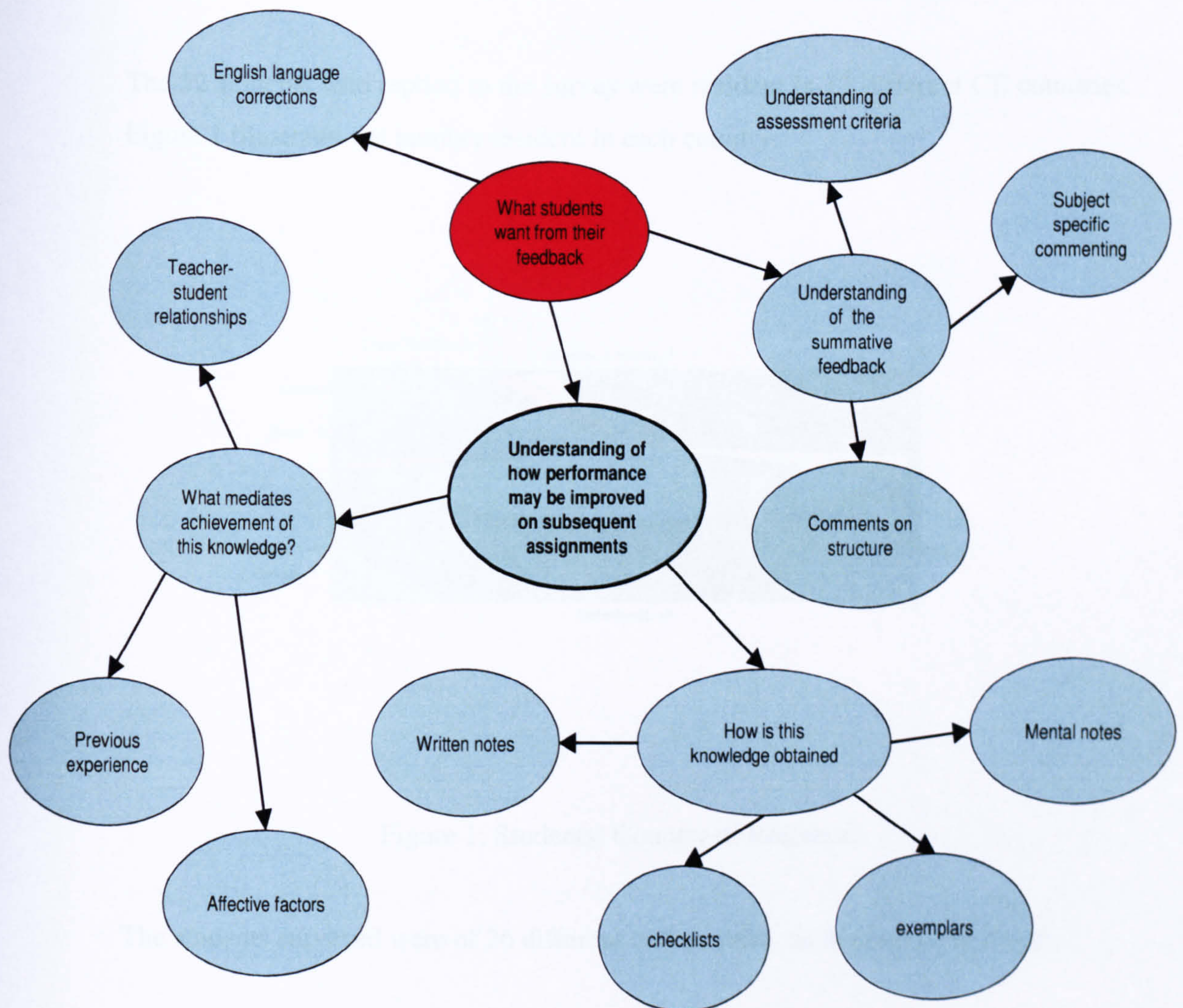
Appendix 10 - Final Codes for Student Interviews

AC = Anglocentricity		
ACgen	General	
ACmat	Of OU materials	
C = courses		
Cfu	Future	
Cp	Prior OU courses	
DL= distance learning		
DLexp	DL experience	
DLneg	Negative aspects	
DLtp	Time pressures	
ED=Education		
EDbg	Educational background	
EDbglang	Language of education	
EDbgfb	Feedback in previous education	
ENG = English language		
ENGcon	Trouble with concepts	
ENGcor	English corrections	
ENGpro	Problems experienced with English	
ENGsch	Learnt at school/when school age	
ENGtr	Travelled to English speaking countries	
ENGwo	English for work	
ENGuni	English at university	
ET = eTMA system		
ETtc	Track changes	
EX = exemplar assignments		
EXac	Shows difference in academic traditions	
EXca	Shows there is no single correct answer	
EXconf	Comparison boosts confidence in own work	
EXdac	illustrates differences in academic traditions	
EXeng	Helps improve English	
EXexp	Illustrates expectations	
EXlang	Helps improve academic writing style	
EXneg	Negative things re exemplars	
EXnu	Why exemplars not used	
EXposgen	Positive general	

EXstr	Illustrates required structure	
EXsty	Useful to see someone else's style	
FB = Feedback		
FBack	Acknowledgement that TMA's been looked at	
FBact	Actively looking for FB	
FBch	checklist	
FBcl	Clarity of FB	
FBcom	Comparison with previous FB	
FBconf	Help gain confidence	
FBcont	Feedback on content	
FBdia	dialogue	
FBemo	Emotions raised by FB	
FBff	Feedforward	
FBfir	What FB is looked at first	
FBgdp	Good points of FB	
FBimp	How FB could be improved	
FBimpt	Importance of FB	
FBlea	How FB helps with learning	
FBmat	FB Matches with students views	
FBmn	Mental notes	
FBno	Notes, highlighting etc	
FBnot	Mark/comment not matching	
FBnxt	Feeding forward to next TMA	
FBord	PT3/TMA order in which read	
FBprev	Previous experience	
FBpro	Feedback on process/structure	
FBrec	Receiving of FB	
FBret	Return to feedback before next TMA	
FBsand	Sandwich approach	
FBsym	Symbols i.e. ticks	
FBtval	Seeing what tutor values in TMA	
FBumar	Understanding the mark	
Higher education = HE		
HEbol	Bologna declaration	
HEcom	Comparison with other courses	
HEcw	Coursework at HEI	
HEdifat	Differences in academic traditions	

HEex	Exams at HE level	
HEdif	Difference with previous HE	
HEfb	Feedback at other HEI	
HElev	Level of previous HE study	
HEm	Marks/grade boundaries	
HEodl	Other distance courses studied	
HEsub	Subject studied at HE level	
P/NOU = Positive/negative OU		
POSOU	Positive OU general	
POSsup	support	
NEGOU	Negative OU	
NEGco	Cost	
NEGiso	isolation	
NEGmat	materials	
NEGte	Too easy for PG doing UG course	
OUatt	OU's attitude to CE students	
REA=Reasons for choosing OU		
REAfl	Flexibility location/cost/country/fitting in	
REALang	Language	
REAre	Recommendations from others	
REAre	Reputation	
REAst	Stimulate brain	
REAsub	Subject	
REL = relationship with tutor		
RELfor	Formality	
RELgen	General	
RELqu	Questioning the teacher	
RELou	OU tutors	
RELcon	Contact with tutor	
RELcomou	Comparing with OU tutor	
SL= student link		
SLgen	General	
SLsa	Sharing assignments	
SLsup	Support	
SLfc	First class	
TT=telephone tutorials		
TTpos	Positive	

Appendix 11 - Key Themes Derived from Thematic Analysis of Student Interviews



Appendix 12 - Detailed Analysis of Survey Data

This appendix supplements Chapter 5 as it contains a more detailed analysis, including illustrative figures, of the data from the student survey.

The 52 students who replied to the survey were resident in 12 different CE countries. Figure 1 illustrates the number resident in each country.

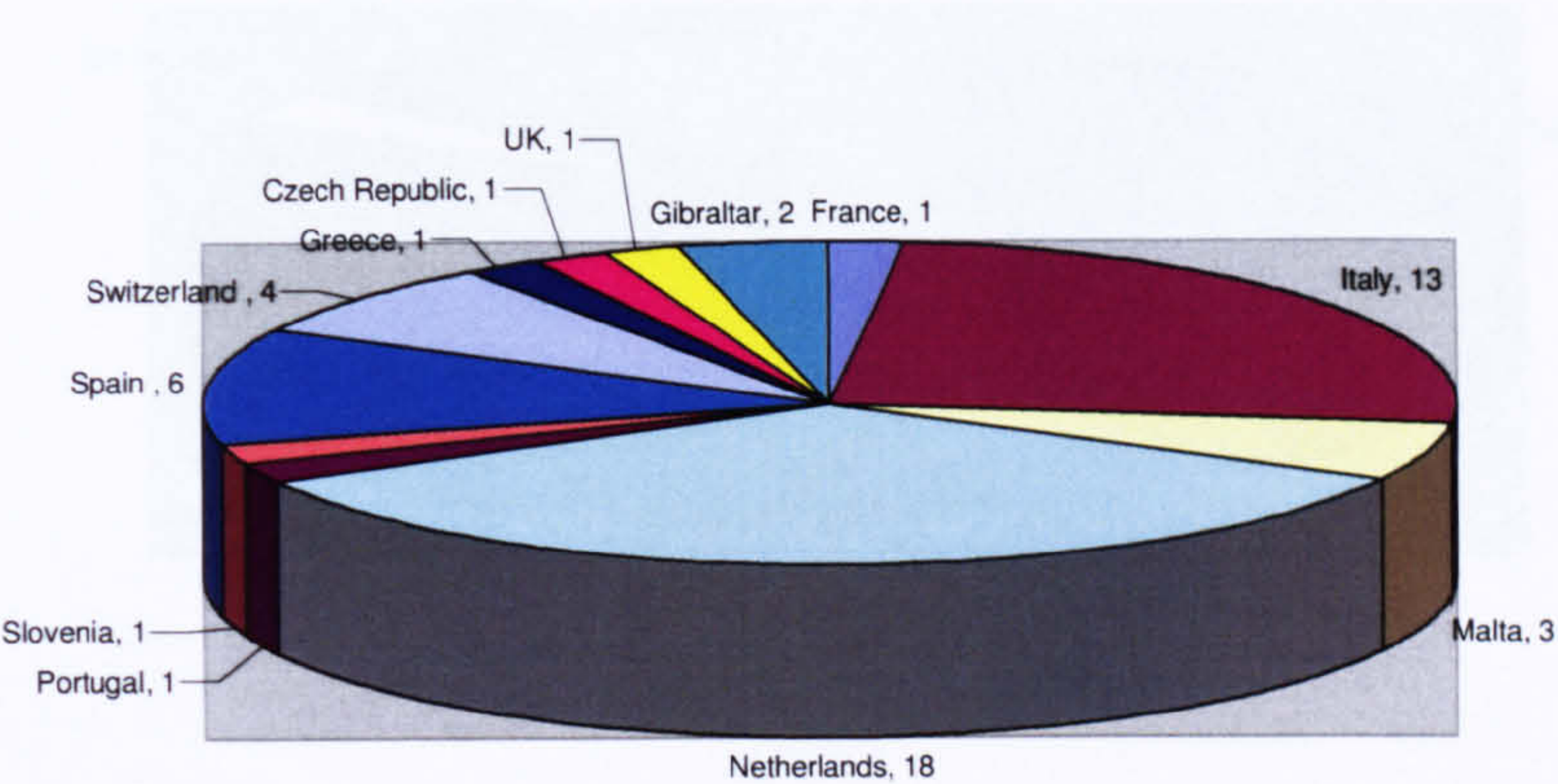


Figure 1: Students’ Country of Residence

The students surveyed were of 26 different nationalities, as illustrated by Figure 2.

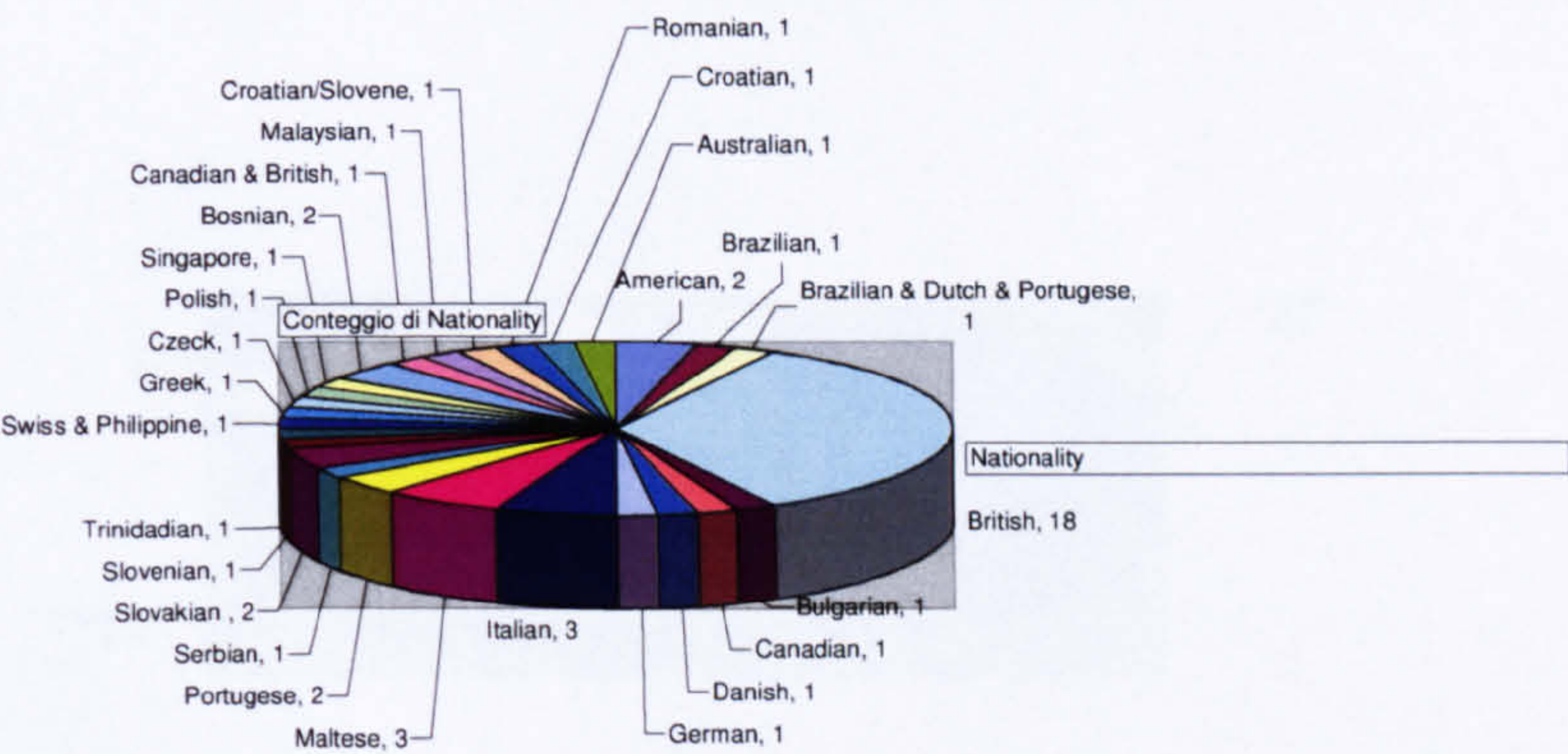


Figure 2: Student Nationalities

The students were native speakers of 18 different languages. Approximately half of those surveyed were either NESs or considered themselves bilingual in English and another language (see Figure 3). Of the remainder, almost all considered English as their second language and a high proportion (81%) indicated that English was one of the main languages they used in their everyday life.

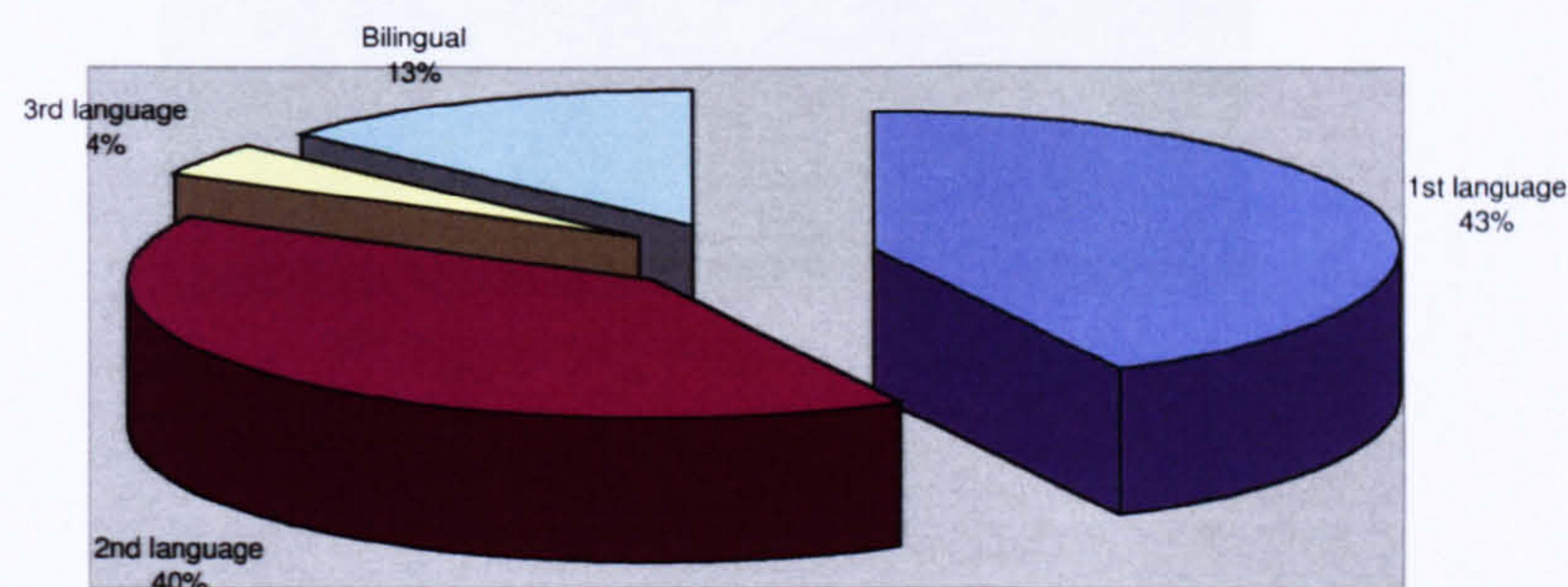


Figure 3: Position of English in Students Language Knowledge

The respondents had been educated in 29 different countries, although when the main language of education was investigated, 49% responded that all of their education had been conducted in English, and a further 31% were educated for part of the time in English (see Figure 4)

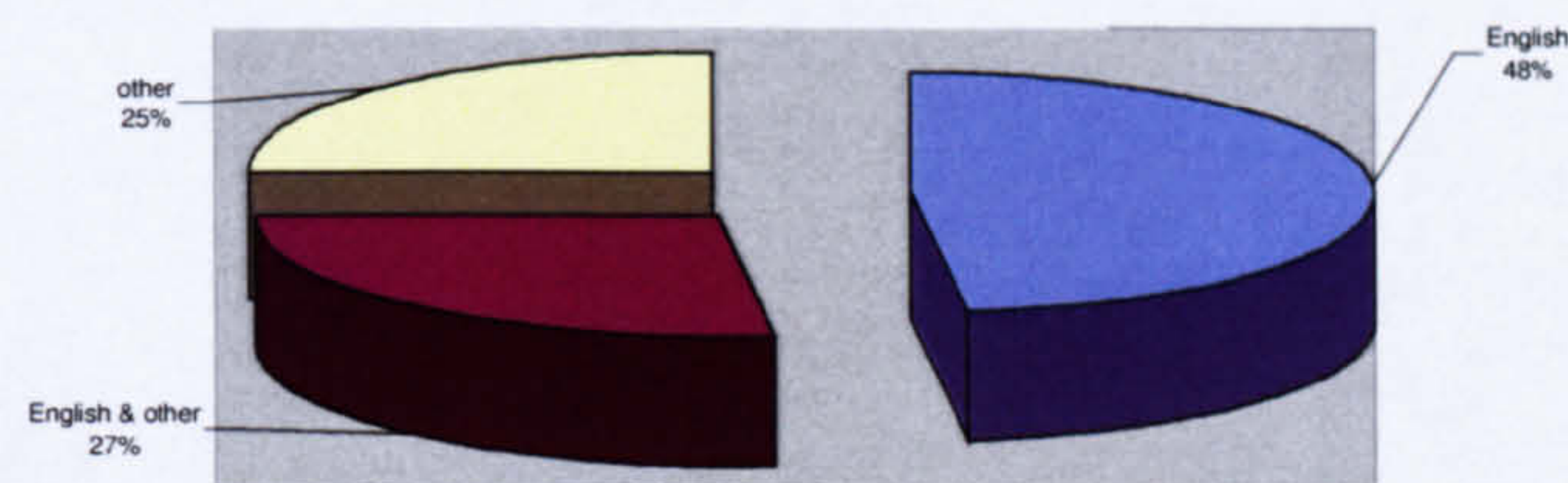
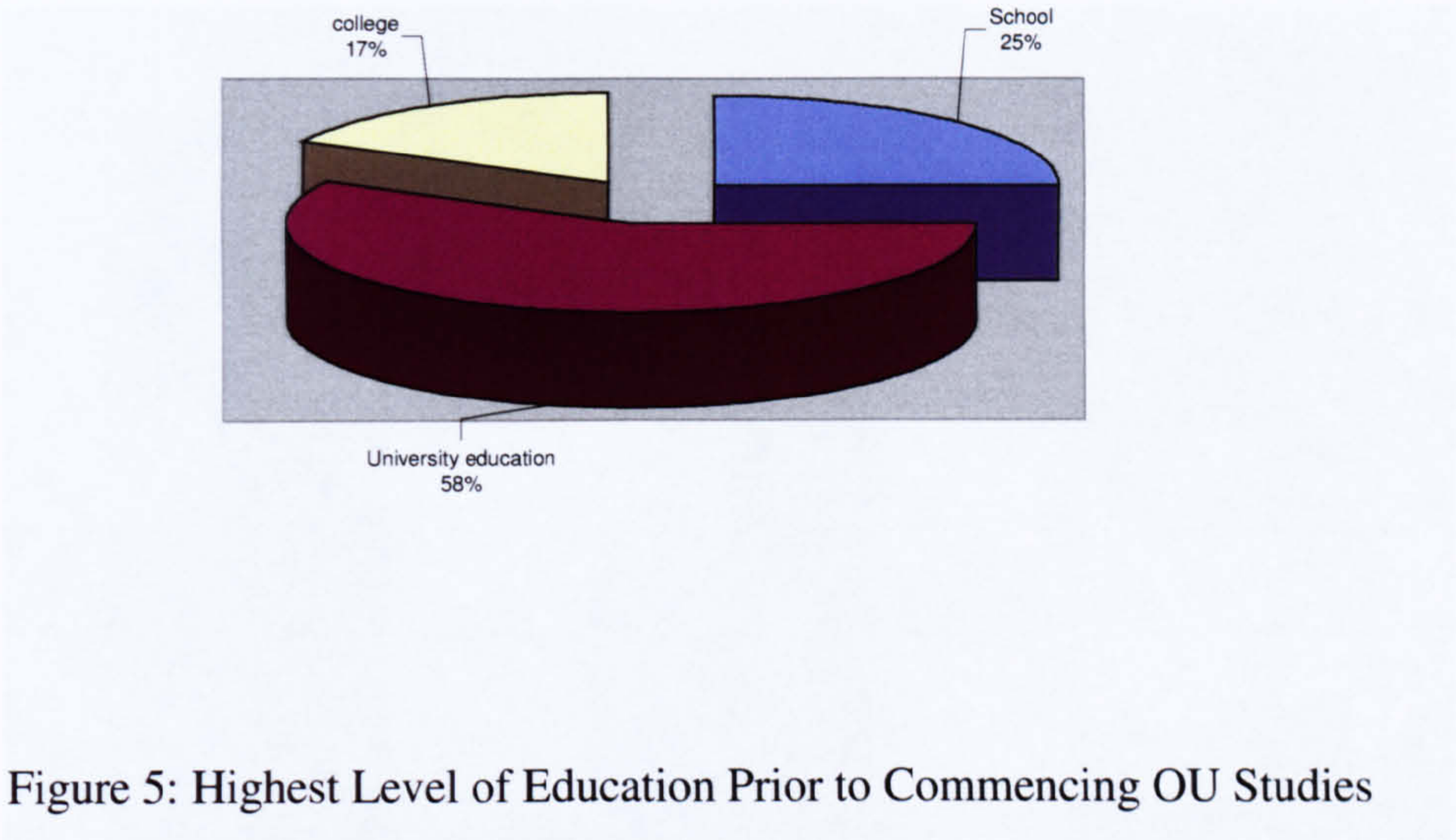


Figure 4: Language in which students were educated

Figure 5 illustrates that a high proportion (75%) of the respondents had undertaken some form of tertiary education and 58% had already obtained a first, or postgraduate degree prior to commencing their OU studies.



When comparing the highest level of study prior to commencing with the OU, Figure 6 shows that there was very little difference between the proportion of NES and NNES students who had completed either a first or postgraduate degree.

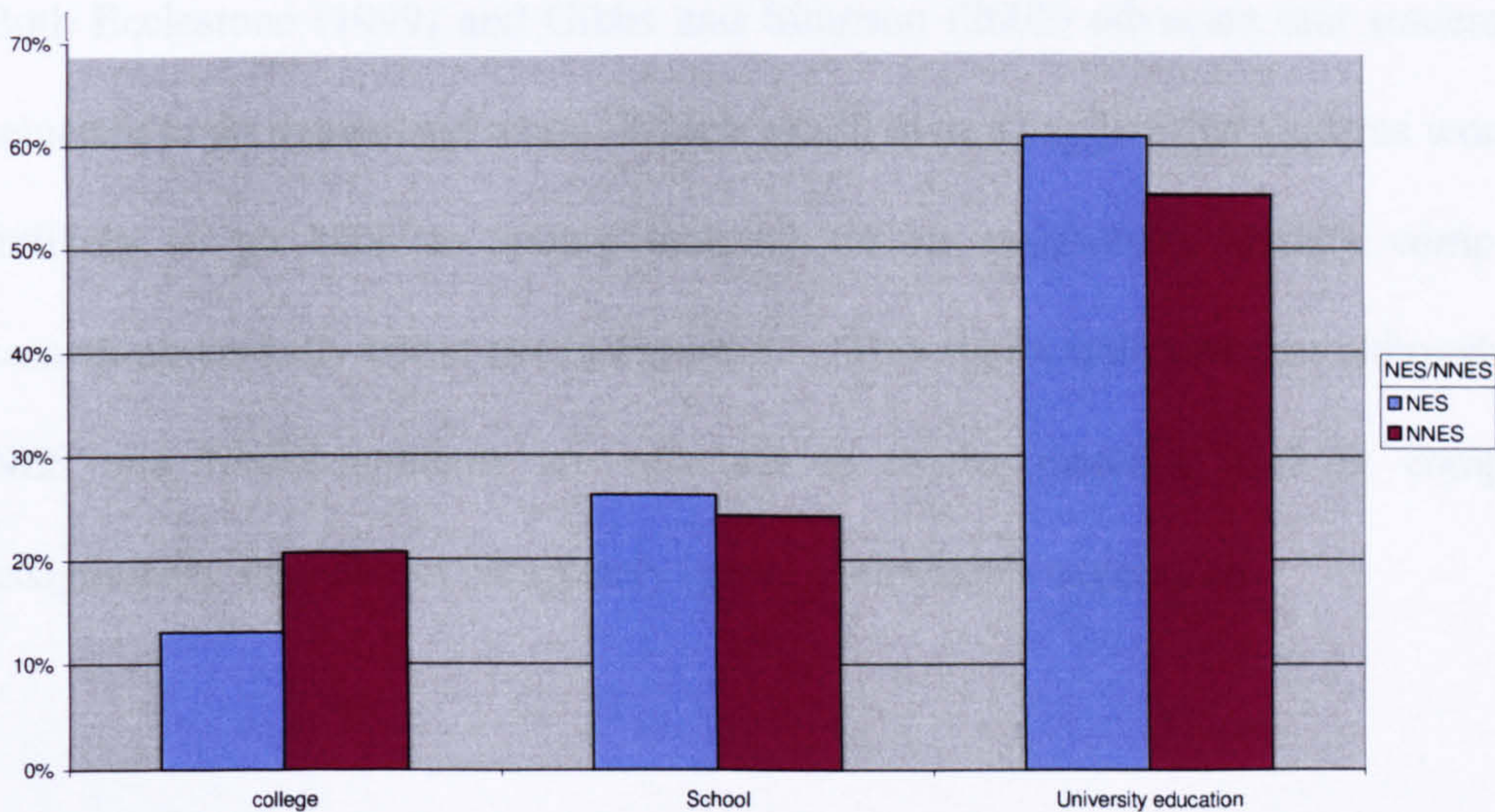
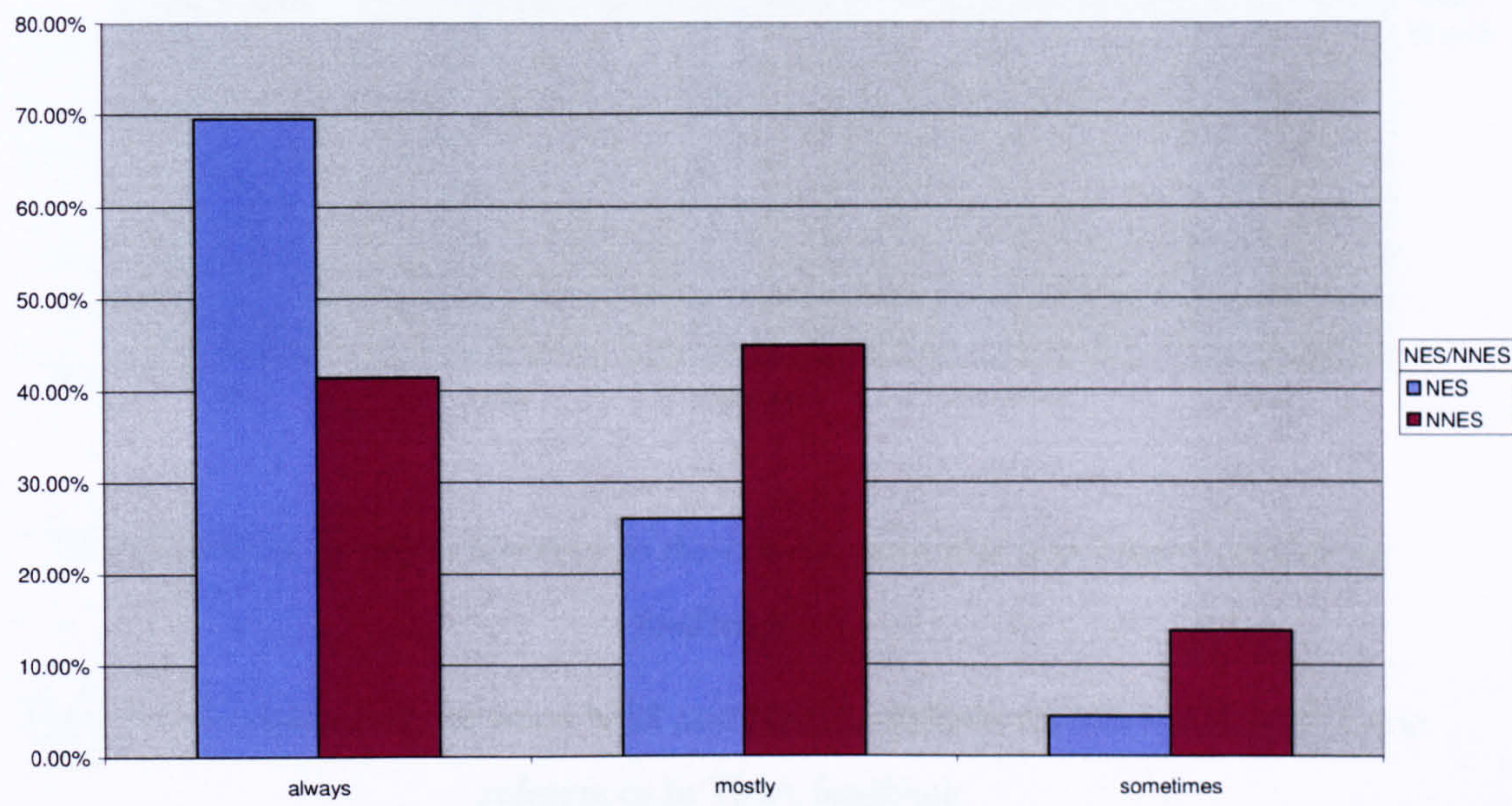


Figure 6: A Comparison of highest level of study prior to OU

Use of Feedback

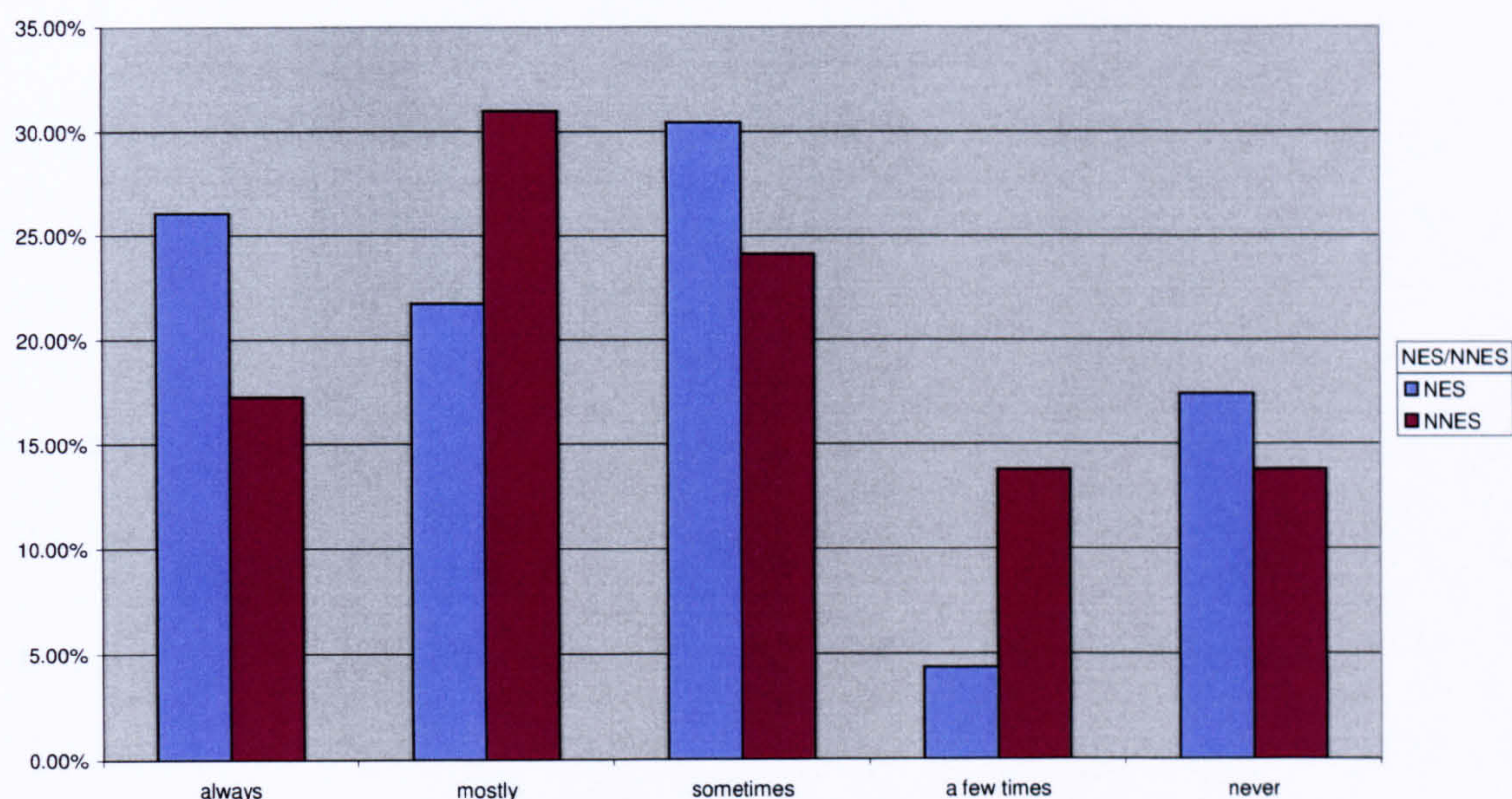
Figure 7 illustrates that a high proportion of NESs felt that their TMA feedback always gave them advice on how to improve on their next assignment. NNEs on the other hand were slightly less confident in this area.



Did the feedback give you guidance as to how to improve in the future?

Figure 7: A comparison of student opinion on the guidance TMA feedback gave them on how to improve on subsequent assignments

Both Ecclestone (1999) and Gibbs and Simpson (2002) advocate that students are reluctant to do unassessed work. Which would in turn suggest that students would be unlikely to go back to source material on an assignment already completed, something partially borne out in Figure 8. This figure indicates that although both NES and NNE students are reluctant to re-vist material used in completed assignments, they do not completely ignore their tutor’s suggestions.

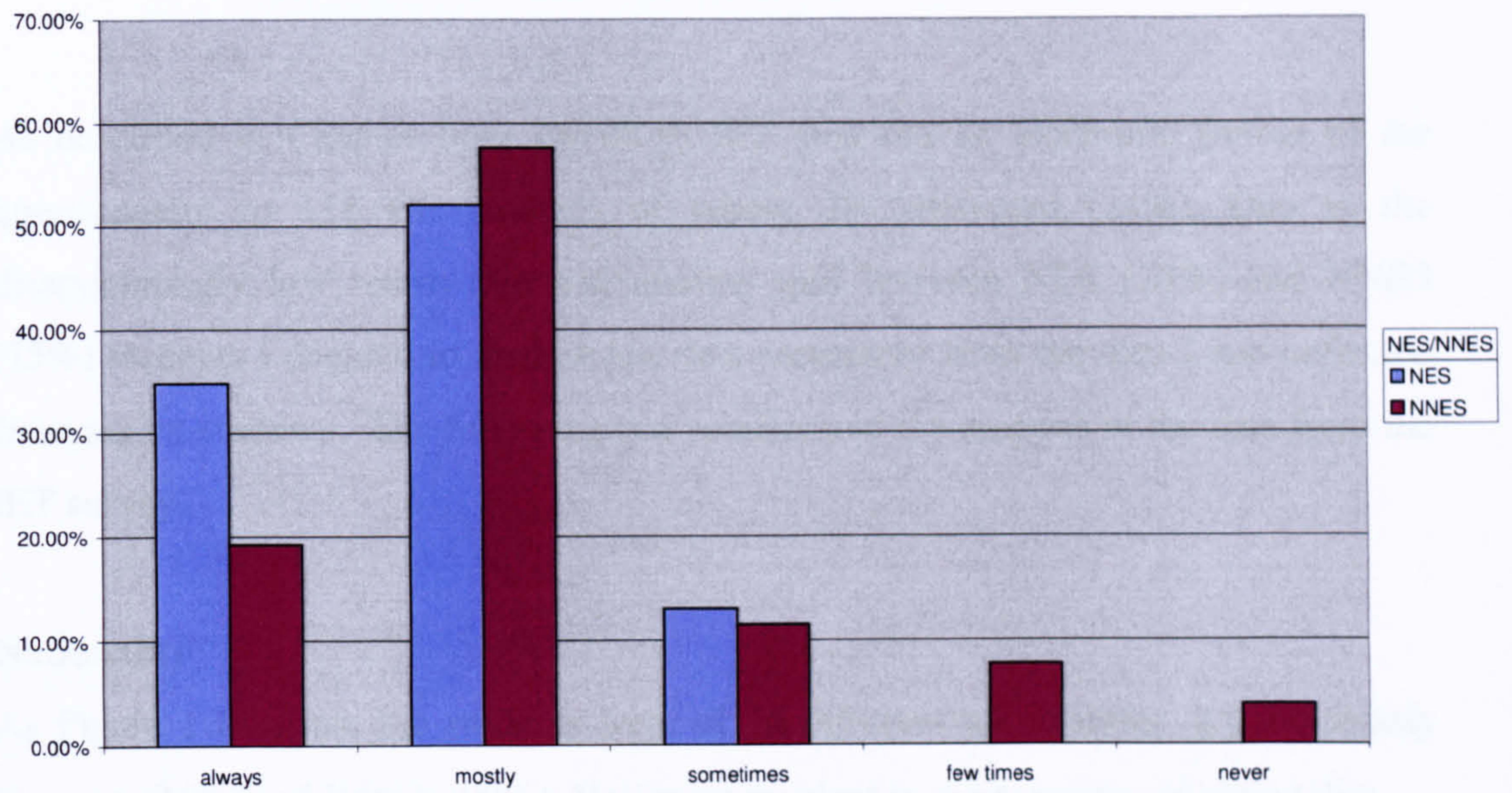


Did you follow up any references to the course materials that I mentioned in my feedback?

Figure 8: A comparison between NES and NNES students on following up of tutor references in TMA feedback

Exemplars

Figure 5.5 (p.94) demonstrated that a higher percentage of NESs than NNESs, always or mostly, read exemplars, (87% vs. 69%). In order for students to be able to utilize exemplars successfully they need to understand why the exemplars are good examples and how they fulfil the learning outcomes of the assignment. Figure 9 illustrates the difficulties that NNESs experience in this area, with 23% of NNESs having a poor understanding of the positive points that the exemplars embody.



Did you understand why the example assignments I sent you were good examples?

Figure 9: Understanding of high standard of the exemplars

Appendix 13 – Analysis of Data from IET Survey

As described in Chapter Four (pp.68-9) IET sent out an electronic format of the questionnaire to 118 CE students of whom 28 responded (24%). Due to the disappointingly low return rate and uneven split between NES (25%) and NNES (75%) students I decided to analyse the data separately from the data I had collected from my ex-students. The following is a summary of the analysis of the data from the IET survey.

Nationality

As Figure 1 illustrate the students were of 16 different nationalities, predominantly German (24%) and British (20%). Half were resident in their country of nationality.

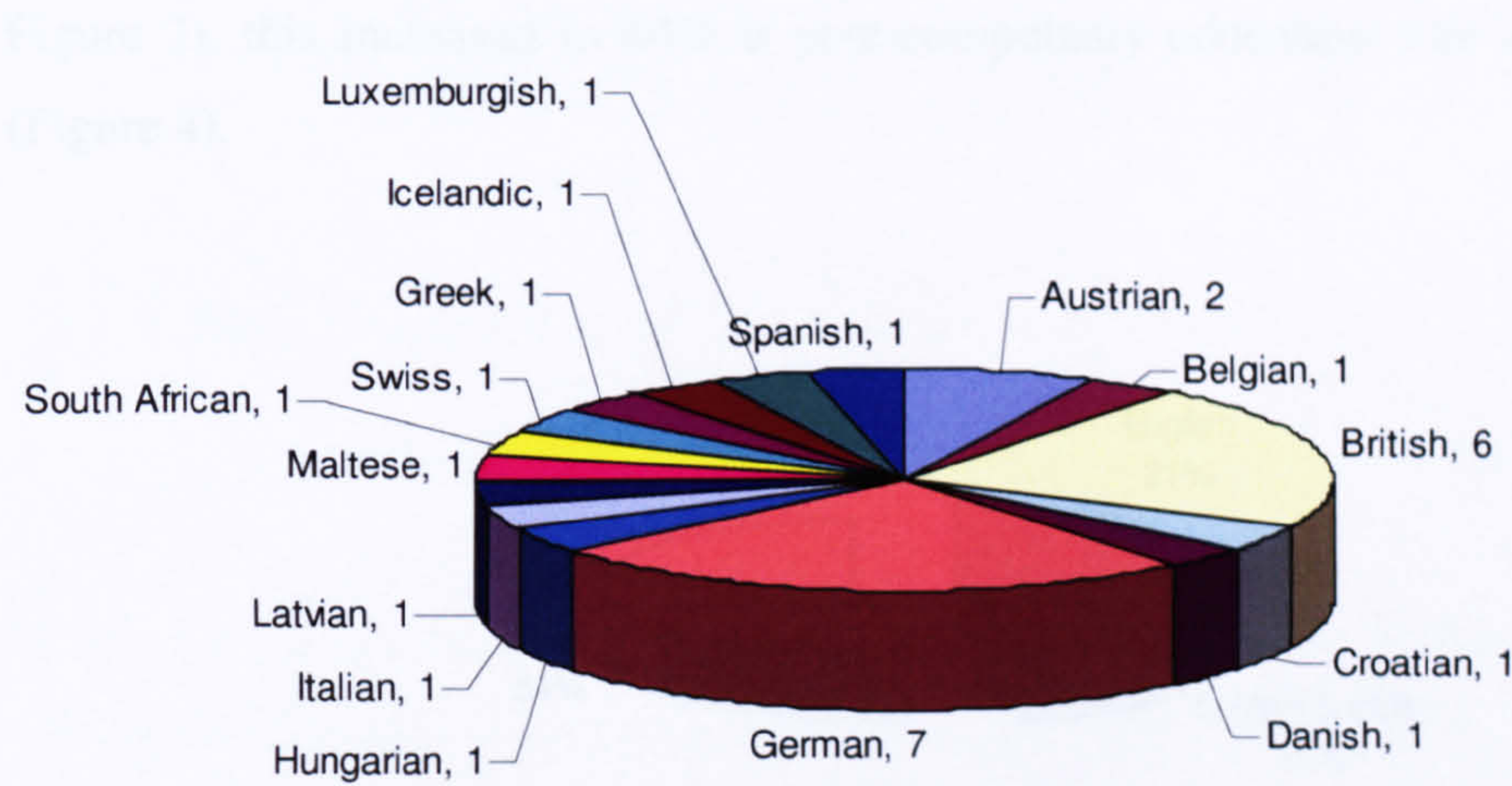


Figure1: Nationality of students

Languages

54% of the respondents considered that solely English or English and another language were their main language(s) for everyday use. Figure 2 illustrates that 25% considered themselves native English speakers.

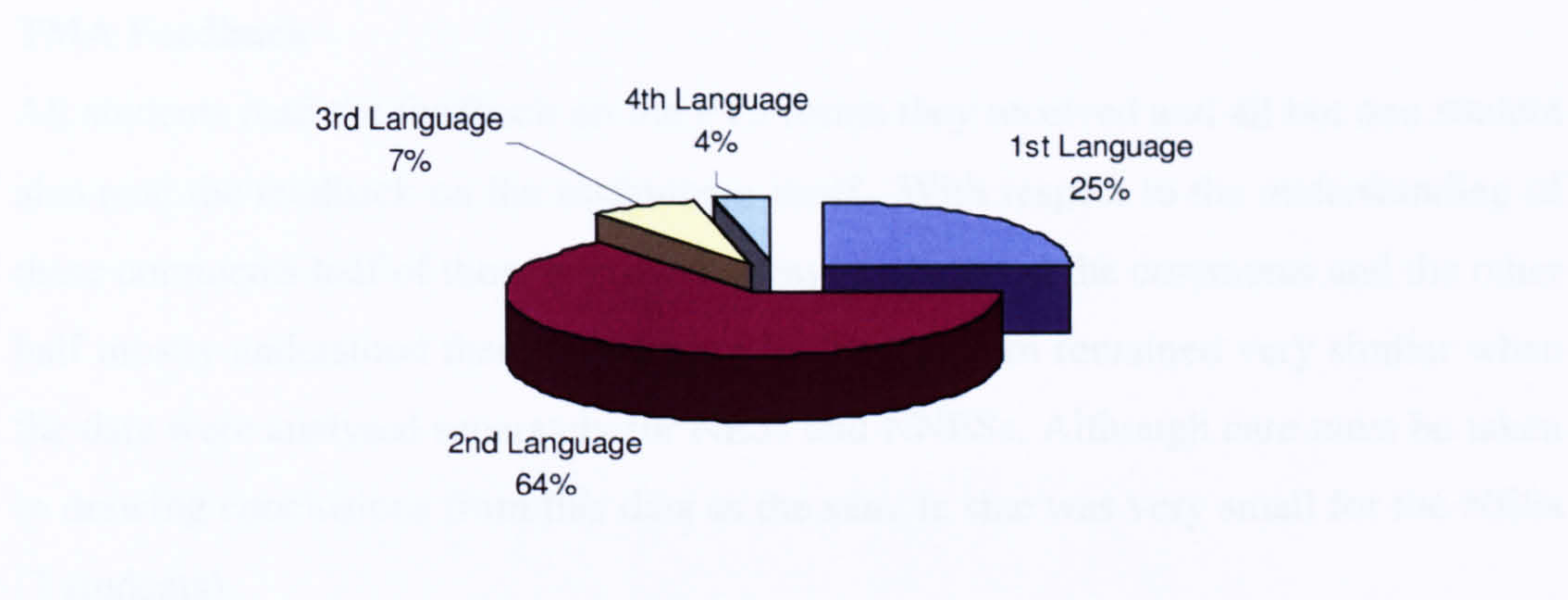


Figure 2: English language level

Previous Education

Many of the students had been educated in English. During their period of compulsory schooling 46% had been educated in English, or English and another language (see Figure 3), this increased to 64% if post-compulsory education was also considered (Figure 4).

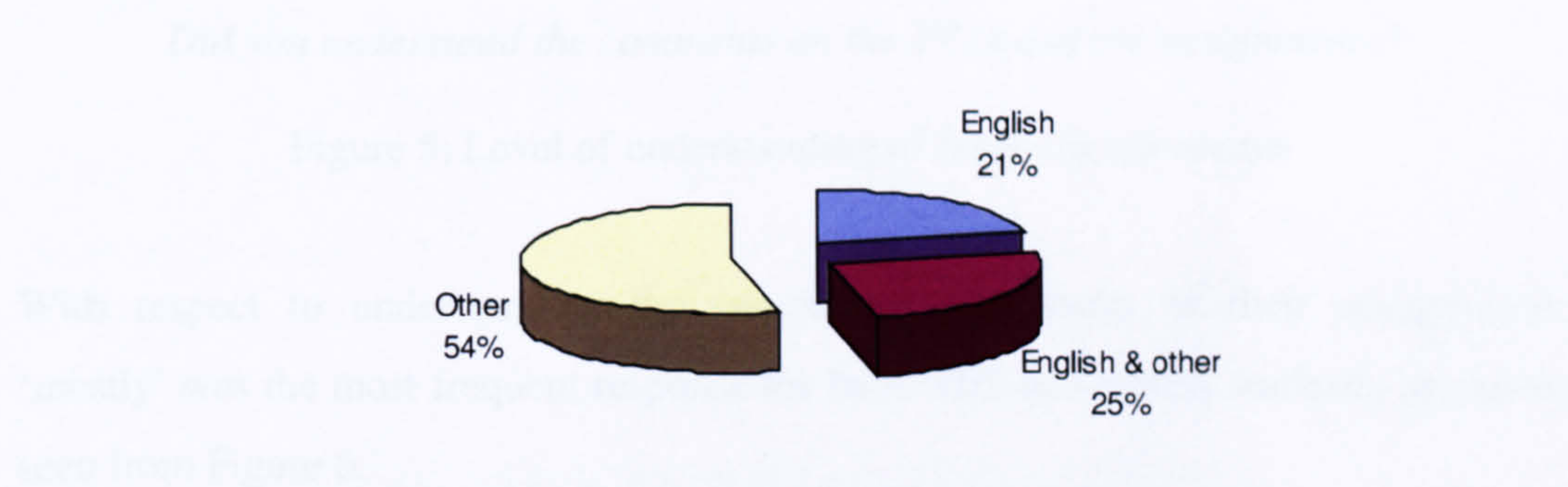


Figure 3: Language used during period of compulsory schooling

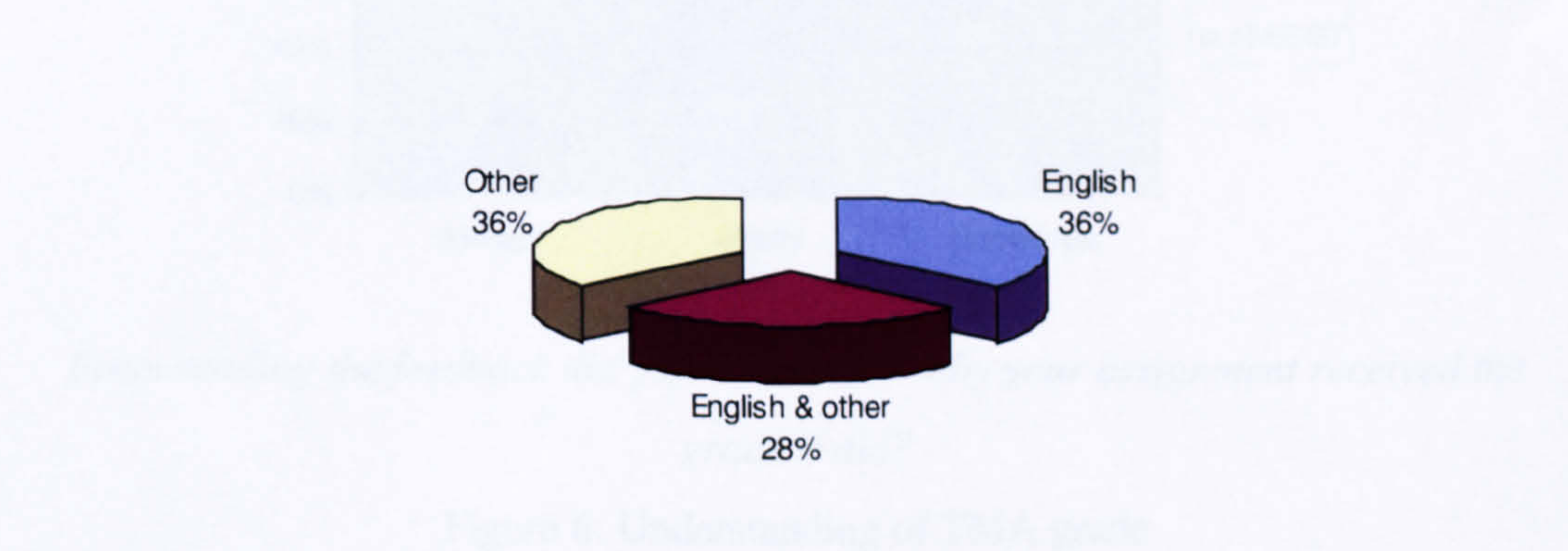
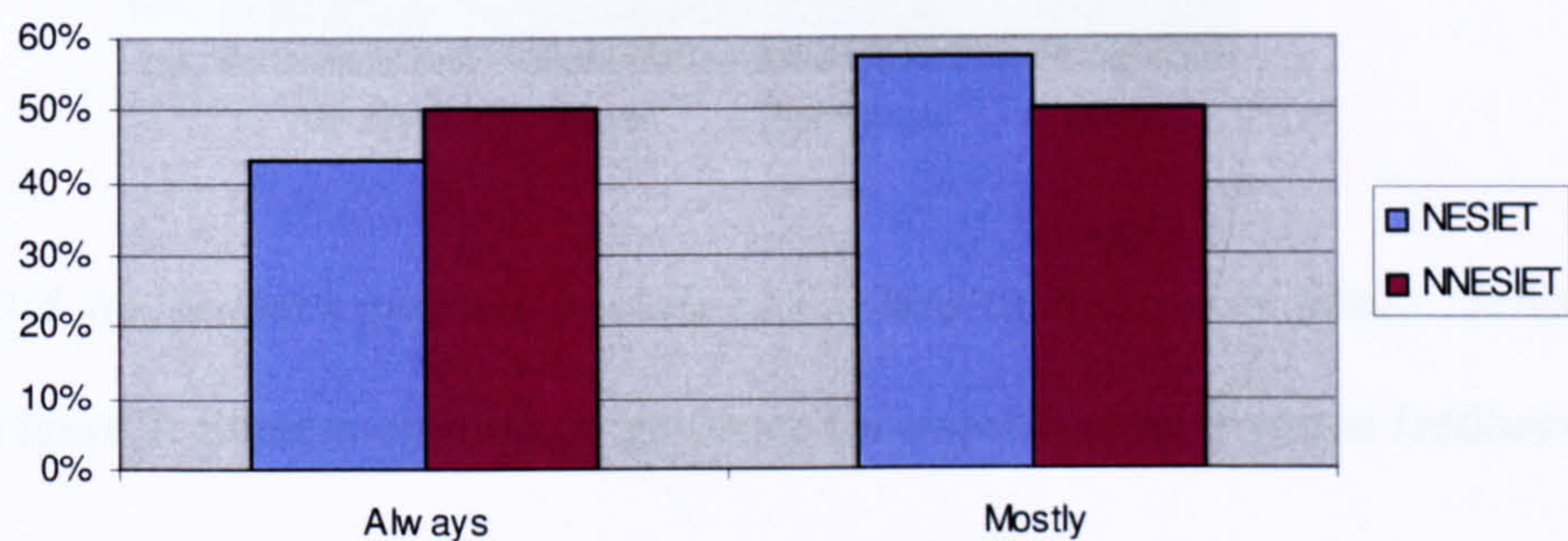


Figure 4: Language used during post compulsory schooling

TMA Feedback

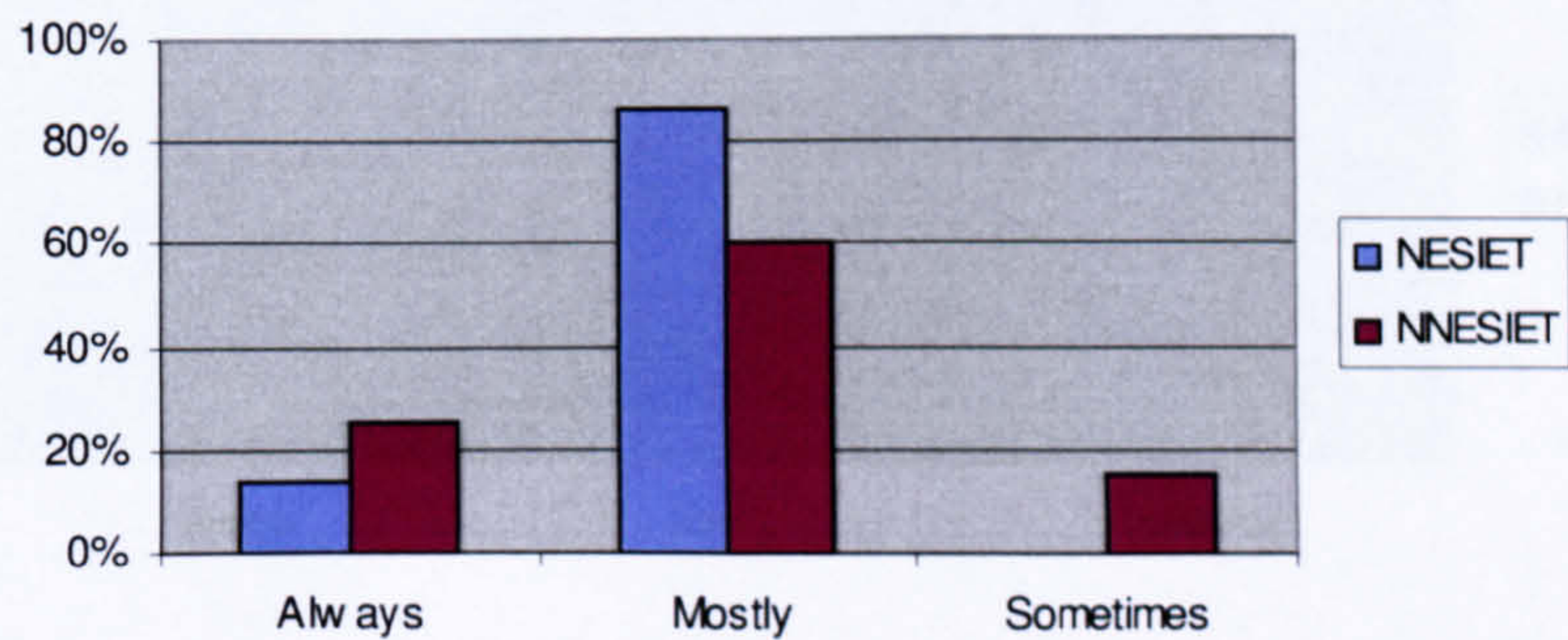
All students read the feedback on the PT3 forms they received and all but one student also read the feedback on the assignment itself. With respect to the understanding of these comments half of those surveyed always understood the comments and the other half mostly understood them (see Figure 5). This pattern remained very similar when the data were analysed separately for NESs and NNEs. Although care must be taken in drawing conclusions from this data as the sample size was very small for the NESs (7 students).



Did you understand the comments on the PT3s and the assignments?

Figure 5: Level of understanding of feedback comments

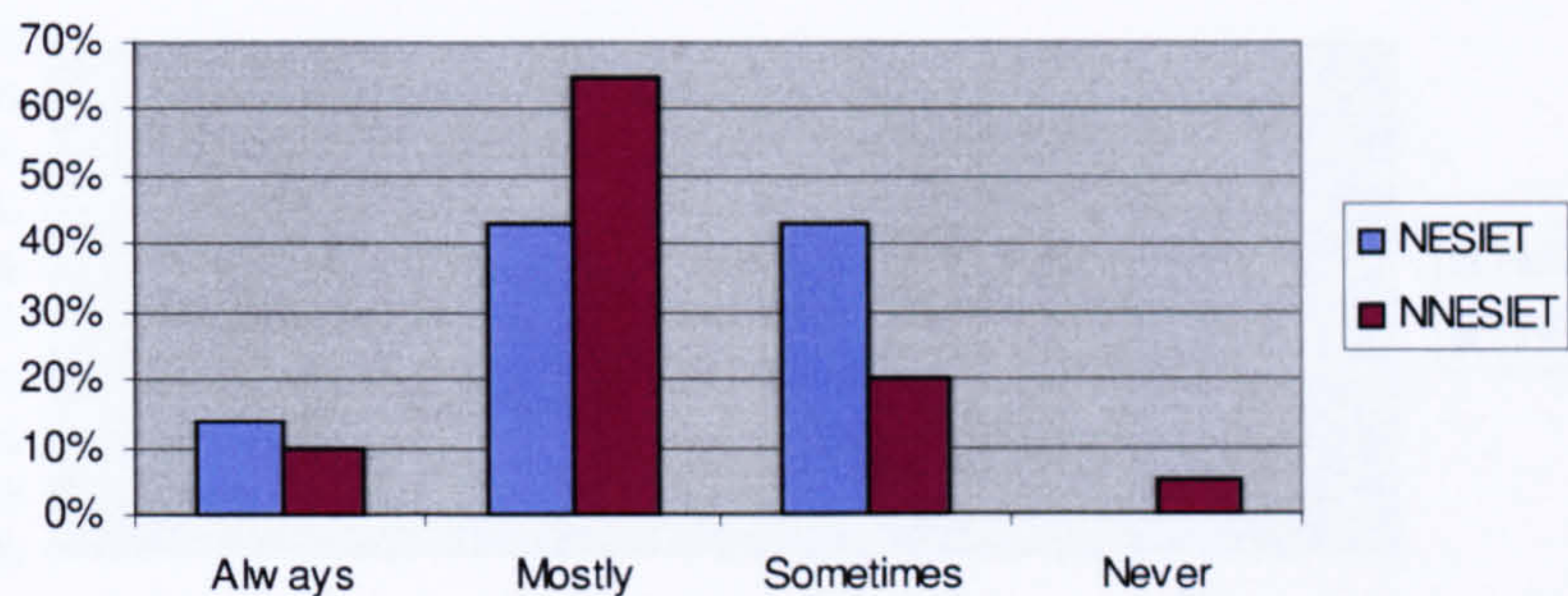
With respect to understanding the summative assessment of their assignments, ‘mostly’ was the most frequent response for both NES and NNEs students, as can be seen from Figure 6.



From reading the feedback did you understand why your assignment received the grade it did?

Figure 6: Understanding of TMA grade

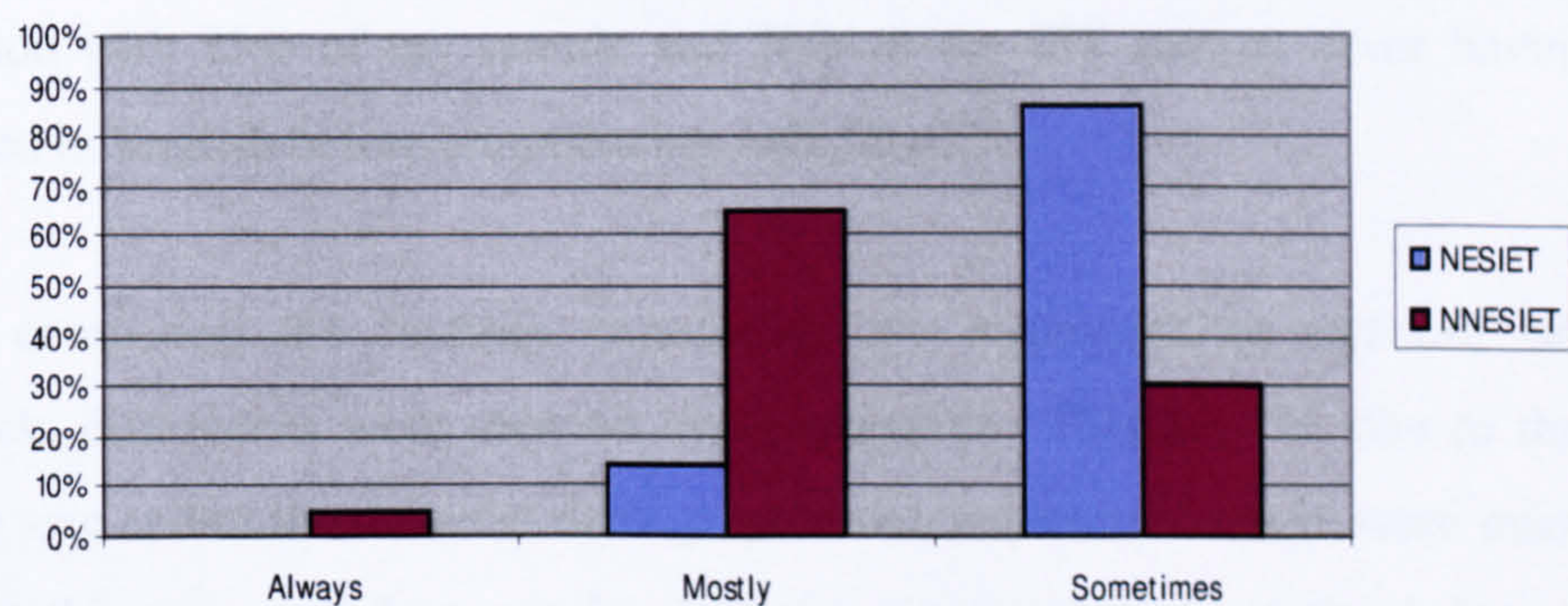
When considering whether or not the feedback gave students guidance on how to improve on future TMAs, diverse findings were found between the two groups. As can be seen in Figure 7, more NNEs students (77%) felt that the guidance always or mostly helped them to improve future TMAs compared to NESs (67%).



Did the feedback give you guidance as to how to improve on future TMAs?

Figure 7: Student opinion on guidance for improvement given in feedback

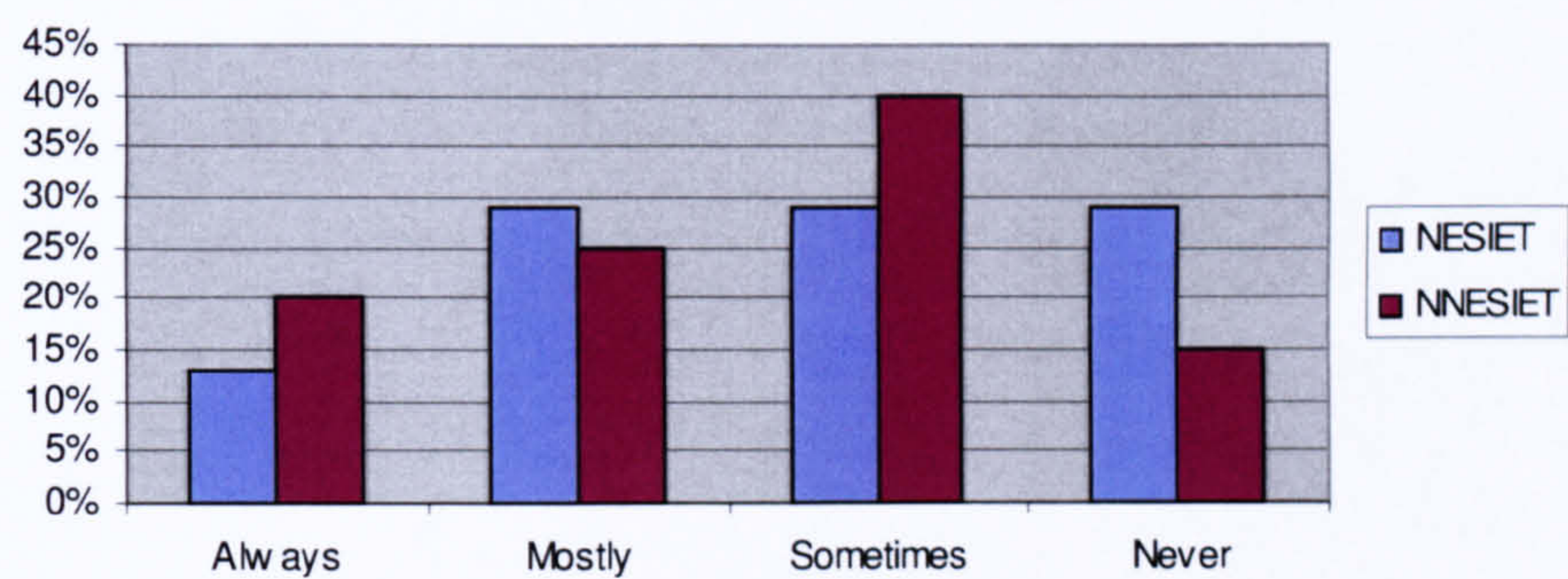
A similar pattern was seen concerning whether or not students felt more confident about tackling subsequent TMAs after receiving feedback, with 70% of NNEs feeling always or mostly more confident about tackling subsequent TMAs after receiving feedback compared with 14% of NESs, (see Figure 8).



Did you feel more confident about tackling your next TMA after receiving the feedback?

Figure 8 – Increase in confidence after receiving feedback

Again a diverse pattern was seen when students were asked whether they re-read their feedback before starting the next TMA. With more NESs never re-reading their feedback than NNEs, (see Figure 9).



Did you re-read the feedback before completing the next TMA?

Figure 9 – students re-reading of feedback before completing next TMA

Comparison between main survey data and IET data

When comparing the demographic data of my sample of ex-students and those who replied to the IET survey the following points were noted. There was a wider spread of nationalities in my sample (26 as opposed to 14). With regard to level of English there were less NESs in the IET sample and more students who considered English as their second language. Similarities were seen with regard to the language of education with 25% of my sample and 36% of the IET sample never having been educated in English before commencing with the OU.

When comparing the findings concerning the understanding and use of TMA feedback, differences were seen on every question. This may be due to the small sample size and/or the different demographic characteristics as there were many more NESs within my ex-student sample. In comparing answers to many of the questions the most obvious difference is the opposite trend seen between NES and NNEs students in the IET sample. Whereas in the IET sample the ‘always’ response’ was frequently higher in the NNEs sample, in the sample of my ex-students, the opposite was seen. As mentioned previously this may have been due the to the small number

of NESs (7 students) in the IET sample or it is possible that only NESs who were experiencing problems with feedback replied to the survey.